



Autism in Schools Projects National Evaluation

Final report

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Executive summary

Following the initial pilot project in the North East in 2018, NHS England funded the development and delivery of Autism in Schools (AiS) projects across the seven regions in England. During the 2021/2022 school year, each region identified an area or areas to plan and deliver interventions with local schools. Variation was expected in the breadth and depth of engagement as some projects were delivered at local authority, regional and Integrated Care System (ICS) level.

NHS England commissioned North of England Commissioning Support (NECS) Research and Evidence team to conduct a national, independent evaluation of the AiS projects. The aim of the evaluation was to explore early project outcomes and bring together learning so far at a national level. The evaluation approach was developed between September 2021 and February 2022. A mixed methods evaluation including an online survey, qualitative interviews and focus groups, and an assessment of national metrics data was conducted from March to August 2022.

Findings from this evaluation are presented in three main sections in this report, which focus on the delivery, outcomes and reflections or learning from the AiS projects. Throughout these sections case studies are presented, illustrating approaches to project activities in more depth.

Common or core project activities which were delivered across the majority of the AiS projects are described. These include but are not limited to Parent Carer Forum (PCF) development, school staff training, and children and young people's training and voice. Information in this section details how project activities were undertaken and varied across the different project areas. Practical challenges are considered for most project activities.

Outcomes are presented for four key stakeholder groups involved in the AiS projects, namely children and young people, parent carers, schools, and school staff. Findings here demonstrate that early desired outcomes have been observed for these key stakeholders.

- Delivery of sessions with children and young people was associated with enjoyment, development of new friendships, improved self-awareness, and resilience.
- Development of PCFs was associated with building parent carer trust in the project and school, building support networks, accessing new information and feeling empowered.
- Delivery of training and support to schools was associated with school staff feeling empowered to support Autistic children and young people, being open to change, and developing better relationships with parents and professionals.

Further, there is some early evidence of attendance improving and a change in school approach to exclusions for Autistic children and young people, and some evidence of meaningful improvements in wellbeing for Autistic children and young people at school and at home, for example a reduced need for respite care in some families.

The penultimate section of this report describes the broader reflections and learning to emerge from the qualitative data, focusing on the barriers and enablers to project delivery and achieving outcomes, as well as information about embedding the project in the future. Six key recommendations are identified for AiS projects: focus on embracing differences and understanding needs; take a flexible approach to multi-area working; work towards connectivity at scale; strategically embed AiS projects for sustainability; further develop national metrics; and continue evaluation.

1 Introduction

1.1 Autism in Schools projects

NHS England analysis provided the evidence base for the initial AiS pilot project. There was an understanding that Autistic children and young people made up over 75% of admissions into mental health hospitals. Root cause analysis found a high proportion of these children and young people had been excluded or out of school prior to admission. Parents reported too many missed opportunities, schools being unable to effectively support Autistic children and systems not being joined up, compounded by a lack of support networks for parents and families.

Children and young people with Autism are more likely to be admitted to hospital due to mental health crisis or perceived challenging behaviour. Admissions may be extended, out-of-area, and have long-term health and wellbeing implications (1).

The AiS project is in line with national aims to provide early intervention and preventative support in schools to Autistic children and young people or neurodiversity (2, 3). The AiS projects aim to work with schools, parent carers and children and young people to improve education, health and wellbeing, reduce school exclusions and hospital admissions (4, 5).

Following an initial pilot project started in the North East in 2018 (6, 7), NHS England funded development and delivery of AiS projects across the seven regions in England. Each region identified an area, or areas, in which to co-produce a project plan with local stakeholders during the Autumn term of the 2021/2022 school year and deliver interventions with identified schools during the Spring/Summer term (4).

AiS project areas of focus are listed in Table 1. Variation in breadth and depth of engagement is to be expected with some projects delivered at a local authority, Integrated Care System (ICS) and regional level. Project teams were able to adapt project activities to meet the identified needs in their area, however core project elements involve:

- building relationships and networks of support for school staff, health and social care professionals, parent/carers and Autistic children and young people,
- developing learning opportunities for schools and PCFs,
- developing education and health support available for Autistic children and young people within schools,
- work to understand and promote the voice of Autistic children and young people within school.

Table 1 Autism in Schools project areas by NHS England Region and Integrated Care System

Region	ICS area	Areas of focus
East of England	Bedfordshire, Luton & Milton Keynes	Bedford borough
	Hertfordshire	Hertfordshire
London	London	London
Midlands	Arden, Birmingham & Solihull	Coventry, Warwickshire, Birmingham, Solihull
	Derbyshire, Nottingham & Nottinghamshire	Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
	Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin	Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin
North East & Yorkshire	Humber, Coast & Vale	North East Lincolnshire
	North East & North Cumbria	North East (original project) North Cumbria
	South Yorkshire	Sheffield
North West	Cheshire & Merseyside	Cheshire East, Knowsley, Liverpool, Warrington
	Greater Manchester	Oldham, Manchester, Rochdale, Wigan
	Lancashire & South Cumbria	Lancashire
South East	Hampshire & Isle of Wight	Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, Southampton
	Sussex	Sussex
South West	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole
	Cornwall & Isle of Scilly	Cornwall & Isle of Scilly

1.2 Project evaluation

National evaluation

NHS England commissioned North of England Commissioning Support (NECS) Research and Evidence team to carry out a national evaluation of Autism Schools projects during the first year of implementation (March-August 2022). The aim of the evaluation was to explore early project outcomes, what went well and learning so far, bringing this together at a national level to inform future planning and national support for implementation of AiS projects.

Project-level evaluation

NHS England also asked each AiS project area to design and complete a project-level evaluation of their project. Project teams may complete evaluation work or commission this externally and can adapt evaluation activities and reporting to reflect project delivery in their area.

Project level evaluations may include a range of elements, including but not limited to:

- details of any initial assessment of need,
- monitoring data to summarise project activities and attendance,

- feedback on project activities,
- audit trails to demonstrate how data was used or feedback incorporated into project development,
- baseline/follow-up quantitative or qualitative measures to support understanding how far projects are meeting desired outcomes.

The team from NECS working on the national evaluation were aware of evaluation activities happening at a local or project-level, and information was kindly shared with the national evaluation team where available.

2 Approach to national evaluation

The national evaluation was designed in collaboration with the NHS England National AiS team using an iterative approach. The evaluation team received initial project plans, had initial meetings with several AiS project teams, and were part of regular Community of Practice events over the course of the 2021/22 school year. National evaluation activities involved a mixed methods online survey, qualitative interviews and focus groups, and assessment of national metrics data.

Online Survey

Between April and May 2022 an online survey was shared, via email and the Future NHS online platform, with people involved in the planning, management, or delivery of AiS projects in each area. The survey aimed to understand the project activities being delivered or planned in each area, stakeholders involved, what had gone well, and learning to date.

Data collected via the survey was used to balance targeting and timing of qualitative interviews and focus groups against project teams' reported progress with stakeholder engagement and project activities within a relatively short project timeline. Survey responses were analysed thematically to understand current project delivery and early learning.

Interviews and focus groups

In June and July 2022, the evaluation team carried out a total of 28 online/telephone interviews and focus groups. These involved 50 AiS project stakeholders from 15 projects across all regions of England (this includes the original pilot project in the North East). Participants included school staff and parent carers who were involved, or had children involved in project activities; and individuals from organisations involved in project co-design, development or delivery including PCFs, local authorities, integrated care systems, mental health support teams, occupational therapy, educational psychology, and charity sector organisations involved in delivering training and/or working with young people.

Interviews and focus groups aimed to explore participants experience of project activities, early outcomes, learning so far, and ideas for how projects should be embedded and sustained in future. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative framework analysis was used; a pragmatic approach for analysing large, complex qualitative datasets across multiple geographies (8). A thematic framework was developed based on overarching themes of project context, activities, outcomes, or future delivery: content in the initial project specification, and pilot project evaluation reports. Nvivo software was used to code transcripts and group codes into themes, with new themes added to the framework as required. The analysis was refined and revisited iteratively during regular evaluation team debriefs. Interview and focus group transcripts were also approached to identify case studies, included within this report.

National Metrics

Five quantitative metrics were identified for exploration as part of the national evaluation by NHS England at the project outset (outlined below). These metrics were developed with support from subject matter experts and working knowledge from the initial project in the North East. Information about the metrics was shared with project teams via the community of practice events and email communication.

Each project was asked to gather and provide data for metrics 1-4 for each school engaged in the project from the 20/21 and 21/22 school year, alongside descriptive data to contextualise these metrics (e.g., school roll information). An excel document was provided as a template for data returns. Data for metric 5 was to be obtained centrally for each region or ICS area from NHS England.

1. Attendance levels for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP (days) and those without the number of young people on part time timetables
2. Permanent and fixed term exclusion data for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP and for Autistic young people without SEN or EHCP
3. The number of Autistic young people who have left school (off roll) in the last two years with SEN or EHCP and reason why and for Autistic young people without SEN or EHCP
4. The percentage of Autistic pupils with SEN or EHCP meeting their short-term targets
5. Admission data for tier 4 beds for Autistic children and young people

The evaluation team reviewed data returned for quality and quantity, to assess the strengths and limitations of using these metrics as national indicators of AiS project outcomes, and whether/how data collection could be improved in future.

3 Delivery of Autism in Schools projects

3.1 National summary

3.1.1 Context/Factors influencing project development and delivery

A range of contextual factors influenced AiS project development and delivery. Three overarching themes were common across projects: geography, readiness, and approach.

Geography

NHS England regions identified areas in which to co-develop AiS projects with local stakeholders. This involved making decisions about the scale at which projects were delivered: regionally, across an ICS geography, across several local authority areas, or one local authority. These decisions were based on physical and administrative geographies, as well as demographics and proposed breadth and depth of engagement.

Advantages of situating aspects of project design and delivery at a local level included taking account of school holiday dates and existing training offers locally; and supporting navigation of relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Geography also influenced approaches to project activities. For example, on the Isles of Scilly one school serves children and young people from five islands; there are plans to deliver training with both school staff and the wider community, including those who work with children and young people in a voluntary capacity.

The way in which projects were able to flexibly adapt to local need and geography was identified as a strength of AiS projects:

"It's very much based on local knowledge, local need, and local geographical areas... I think that's the beauty of the project, the flexibility of the project, to be able to have those core values or objectives and aims but a lot of freedom to be able to do it how it works best for you" (PCF Lead [30]).

Readiness

Within each geography the readiness of relevant organisations and networks also influenced project development and delivery. AiS projects were able to build upon strong foundations where links between schools, parent carers, and key services were already well-established.

For example, some areas were able to effectively communicate with strong networks of schools via local authorities or Multi-Academy Trusts; and to engage well-established PCF networks with active links into schools. Where networks were less well-established or absent, projects invested time and resource in developing relationships and building networks.

"we've got a schools network, we've got a school partnerships manager within the local authority. During Covid the schools were meeting regularly, so the heads had a fortnightly call with the local authority. So the relationships are really strong and so, actually, engaging with the schools hasn't been as difficult... Because there's already an expectation around development, things like the restorative practice and the relational approaches that we've been doing." (Project Lead [29])

"The forum had already got quite strong links, and once we knew [the schools] chosen for the ten pilots, we contacted them and said, "We know you're part of this pilot, this is what we want to do. Can we have a meeting?" (PCF Lead [13])

Similarly, some AiS projects were immediately linked with relevant local services with aligned goals, whereas others had to work to assess and fill gaps in services, and to win hearts and minds.

"we had got a team of Autism outreach teachers already... that then came on to the team with us, and then I was already involved in the relational and restorative practice. So we became really aware straight away that it all kind of linked in" (Inclusion Officer [18])

"The difficulty that is there is every local authority has a very different make-up. They don't naturally have inclusion support there... So it's a bit of a postcode lottery" (Project Lead [16])

Approach

Leadership and engagement approaches influenced development and delivery of AiS projects, linked in part to the range of organisations and individuals involved in each project.

Leadership responsibility for AiS projects sat with people from a range of backgrounds and experience from the NHS, local authorities, PCFs, the charity sector, and others. Some areas recruited, seconded or commissioned dedicated project managers and delivery partners; others assigned project management and delivery to existing staff or organisations within the system.

AiS project approaches involve navigating complexity: engaging and managing relationships with multiple individuals and organisations at multiple levels of involvement. A range of leadership and engagement approaches were described, including top-down project management, bottom-up relationship building, and co-production approaches.

"I've been working with the project management team... We come together and we obviously set our actions for that coming week and it's down to me to then liaise with all the other agencies that are involved... the schools and the SLT [Senior Leadership Team] in the schools and then bringing in some other outside agencies and making sure the local authority is updated with what's going on" (Local Authority Lead [31])

Approaches were closely linked to geography and readiness, as well as project leaders' experience, authority, and preference. For example, approaches to selecting schools to engage included data-driven assessment of need, working with schools based on readiness to engage, geographical catchment area, and/or practicalities of PCF delivery e.g., delivery capacity and transport links. Ultimately, stakeholders at various levels of involvement identified that a flexible approach to projects is key.

"We agreed the same principles right at the beginning that we keep coming back to, so that although what we're delivering looks and feels slightly different, the end result is designed to be the same... It's really interesting how very different the three local authority areas are, and how very different the three CCG [former Clinical Commissioning Group] areas have developed stuff. I hadn't realised quite how different the three of us would be. But actually, what we've been able to find is those core common threads through, and I think the ability to be flexible with the programme is absolutely going to be the key to it." (Project Lead [29])

3.1.2 Project activities and engagement

New AiS projects were rolled out in 2021/22, with the majority of projects beginning to deliver project activities in the Spring and Summer terms. Table 2 maps project activities against core project elements. There was variation between projects in the combination of activities and delivery approaches used.

At the time of the online survey (April-May 2022), most project teams reported they were on or ahead of schedule with the following activities: core training for school staff, training for neurodiverse children and young people and the development of both existing PCF networks and new school-based forums. Some project teams were behind schedule or had planned the following activities: developing networks for school staff, additional training for school staff and parents, and enhanced mental health and wellbeing services in schools.

In addition, some project teams reported progress with environmental improvements to schools, as well as other work on digital platforms, a project newsletter, a SEND parent involvement policy, and neurodiverse representation on the student council.

Online survey responses indicated that PCF representatives, PCF members and school champions, including Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), were amongst the most engaged stakeholder groups across the projects. While stakeholder groups such as headteachers, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), neurotypical children and young people, and national community and voluntary sector partners were involved in some AiS projects, these groups were not reported to be as engaged.

Focus groups and interviews with project teams focused on a range of activities including school staff training; environmental assessment; PCF development; training and activities to promote children and young people's voice; and developing education and health support. This section of the report describes how these activities were delivered in areas where stakeholders participated in the evaluation.

It is important to note that some areas did not take part in qualitative interviews and focus groups, as their project were working to an alternative or delayed project timeline. This means some project activities and approaches are not represented in this evaluation report, e.g., direct employment of professionals to work with families.

Table 2 Autism in Schools core project elements and activities based on NHS England guidance for regions (4)

Core project elements	Project activities
Building skills, relationships, and support networks	Training for children and young people Activities to understand/promote children and young people's voice Parent carer forum development Co-production approaches
Developing learning opportunities	School staff training Parent carer forum training Communities of practice
Developing education and health support	Education, health and social care professionals/services working together Environmental assessment Advice, guidance, mentoring and coaching for schools Enhanced offer for Autistic children and young people

3.1.3 School staff training

Training was offered to school staff in most project areas. Training was delivered by a range of facilitators including project team members and individuals with lived experience of Autism. Many areas commissioned training via delivery partners such as Autism Education Trust (AET) representatives or licence holders, Daisy Chain, and local charities. There was variation in training topics and content available to school staff across the project areas. For example, bespoke training packages were created by some delivery partners, and some project teams chose to adapt, reshape, and condense training materials they were given from other sources. In other areas, training sessions were informed by the suite of materials provided by the AET, or content was linked to AET standards and competencies.

“We took the modules and the learning sets and used a local charity... we gave them the task of writing a bespoke training package for the modules and for the learning sets. They have been delivering the training here, and all of those modules have been delivered to all of the schools that have been selected for our project” (PCF Lead [28]).

In some project areas, facilitators described a tailored approach to delivering school staff training, e.g., based on initial discussions with school staff about their learning and development needs relating to neurodiversity. Some of that information was captured using tools such as Microsoft forms and Survey Monkey:

“I did a SurveyMonkey questionnaire to just gather some thoughts and one of the questions is, “How well do you think you currently, as a school, support neurodiverse students?” I did a Trip Advisor 5-star rating scale and 80% rated it as three stars. Consistently, the comments were: we have patches of excellence and some staff that

don't quite get it. So, what I've asked to do in some schools is to work on a specific project with staff that they feel don't get it" (Staff Trainer [03]).

In some project areas, the training offer was linked to other project elements. One project team reported that they were hoping to identify commonalities across environmental audits carried out in their local schools and offer a group session on relevant topics or adjustments to members of the school champions' network. For instance, in another project area training or development modules offered were aligned to needs identified during initial learning walks (environmental assessments or audits) in each school:

"We have modified the range of training that we already have in the city, given the progress that's been made around the work. We did a learning walk with the schools at the beginning of the programme, and then we designed an individual action plan for each of them. So, then you've done the development modules that made sense for their action plan. Some of our schools have done loads, some of them haven't done any, and everything in the middle. So, we designed a bespoke plan for them, really, and some of that involved the training modules" (Project Lead [29]).

In the main, the content of training for school staff focused on understanding or making sense of Autism. These sessions included topics such as social interaction and communication, thought processing and information and sensory processing. Sessions also focused on individuality, environmental adaptations, reasonable adjustments, and relationships:

"It's for people to have a better understanding about Autism, and what that means and making sure that it's very individual and person-centred, because no two people with Autism are the same... knowing them as an individual, what things can impact on them and affect their ability to learn and to be able to cope within a school environment" (Staff Trainer [01]).

As part of this style of training, exercises were undertaken to adopt and consider the perspective of Autistic children and young people. In some areas, facilitators invited speakers and delegates to share their lived experience. Other examples of training activities to understand how students may feel, included facilitators using non-verbal communication (i.e., hand gestures) or speaking in a foreign language, as well as varying the tone and volume of their voice, then asking school staff whether they could understand the instructions and how they felt.

"We do various experiences to help the delegates walk a few steps in their shoes. So, one thing that I will do is I will ask them to have a conversation with their eyes closed so that they're deprived of non-verbal communication to, I guess, replicate what it must be like for some of our students who struggle to read non-verbal communication" (Staff Trainer [03]).

Training sessions which built upon understanding Autism focused on strategies which could be used with and taught to neurodiverse students. Examples included strategies based on the 'zones of regulation' and approaches informed by well-known and accepted authors in the field (e.g., Ross Green's collaborative proactive solutions). Some areas provided workshops covering topics such as Autism and Anxiety, Good Autism Practice, Exclusions and Structural Reasonable Adjustments.

Project teams and PCF representatives also described how they had set up information giving and training sessions from relevant local specialists, including educational psychologists, other specialist schools, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the lead SEND professional from the local authority. In some instances, it was acknowledged that there had previously been an absent or lacking relationship

between schools and these specialists or organisations. Importantly, in one of the project areas, as part of their learning and development offer, there was initial progress in bringing together specialists to support school staff in two mainstream schools:

“the most valuable thing is having that collaborative approach. So, it is the specialist me from a specialist background, but working with [the local authority outreach team] as well, and having that collaborative approach, and using our combined specialist knowledge, skills, and understanding to upskill the staff in the mainstream settings because we’re stronger together” (Staff Trainer/Specialist Teacher [45]).

There was variation within and across project areas regarding which school staff received training. In most areas, training was provided for teachers and teaching assistants, with some project areas offering whole staff sessions or combined sessions for parent carers and professionals. In one area, members of the project team described that if training sessions were not fully booked this offer was shared with other schools in the local authority area, as well as parent carers and other relevant professionals. In another area, a targeted approach was used with some training sessions being open to specific staff groups only.

Where combined training sessions for parent carers and school staff or professionals took place, this was considered by the majority to be a useful and valuable shared learning opportunity. However, the importance of ensuring appropriate conduct in shared training sessions was also highlighted. Training sessions commonly took place on inset day days, however some sessions took place during term time and normal timetabled week, where in some instances supply teachers were provided to enable staff to attend.

Evaluation participants reported a mixture of online and face to face training opportunities, highlighting that COVID-19 impact on how some sessions were delivered. In person training was thought to provide more opportunity for discussion. As part of their ongoing training offer, some project teams had made training resources and recordings available online and were setting up peer learning networks via online portals or digital platforms. While recording training sessions was considered a useful option for school staff who could not be present, it was felt this should be used as a substitute for live training sessions which allow for discussion, shared learning, networking, as well as encouraging attendance.

In most project areas, the training being offered to school staff was being evaluated. Questionnaires and surveys were being used to collect evaluation information before and after training sessions. Evaluation questions were focused on several areas including how many staff had attended training sessions, gathering broad feedback on the training and measures relating to staff skills, their confidence and how they understand and meet the needs of a child or young person with Autism.

There were some challenges reported with the training offered to school staff across the project areas. For example, some participants reported delays in offering or delivering training to schools in their areas and highlighted the importance of providing schools advance notice for planning and agreeing training dates before school inset days are allocated. In another project area, school staff reflected on feelings of disappointment associated with the training, including the duration of the session (shorter than expected), pace and delivery of the session (rushed, repetitive & not interactive), and the lack of practical or tailored resources which could be used in their schools. Another challenge associated with training for school staff was understanding existing training offers and avoiding duplication in one geographical area:

“what we’ve done in the last couple of months is meet with each of the local authorities, and say, “Tell us what your [AET] licence looks like, what is the training offer that you’ve got, what is the training offer that we should be signposting schools to be doing? Because that’s already funded and there’s no point us delivering something that is already funded, it’s about what else can we do? And that’s the bit that we’ve worked hard to find out and do” (Project Lead [16]).

3.1.4 Environmental assessment

Most of the AiS projects had encouraged participating schools to undertake an environmental assessment, which were also referred to as sensory audits or learning walks. These assessments looked to explore and observe the sensory aspects of the school environment and were led by occupational therapists (OTs), educational psychologists, Autism leads or representatives from the Youth Trust, staff from mental health support teams and local charities. The people involved in the assessments varied by school and by project area, and included SENCOs, parent carers, PCF leads, local authority staff, school staff (inc. senior leaders, headteachers & deputy heads) and Autistic young people or adults.

To complete the audit, the assembled group took a tour of the school and/or relevant areas of the school and made notes or completed a ‘tool’. For example, participants described using the AET’s audit tool, as well as locally developed standardised audit documents. Several different settings were assessed including the whole school, individual classrooms, and sensory rooms. A group also attended one school during the busy lunchtime period and another project offered feedback on a new build school, which was referred to as a *“blank canvas”*. Another project had developed a sensory environmental audit for pupils to complete with a member of staff, which had been trialled and was due to be rolled out:

“We commissioned some specialist OTs going to each of the 20 schools to do a sensory walk and it was done with a member of staff, with the PCF lead locally, and in almost all cases with an Autistic young person as well. They go around the school and talk about what works and what doesn’t work in terms of the environment. That comes up with a report, which includes some recommendations, some are priority recommendations, and some are nice to haves” (Project Manager [36]).

In one area, Autistic children and young people took part in an audit during one of their training sessions:

“We did a walk round the school as an activity and we had red and green cards, and they hold up how they feel in that area, whether it’s somewhere they find a bit too much, or somewhere they find it’s okay. And then we had some examples that they put in their books”. (Charity Partner [20])

The aim of the assessment was to create or adjust the physical environment in schools to ensure Autistic children were comfortable, supported, and happy. Participants reported that in most cases relatively straightforward changes were identified:

“a fresh pair of eyes, an expert pointing the simple things out in some cases, really simple things that staff can do, easy changes that can be made that might just make life a little bit easier for some of these children” (SENCO [14])

“It was little things like the area that the young people were getting sent to when they were sent out from lessons, the door swung open about 20 times just while they were having that meeting. They were like, “What do you think that impact has on somebody?” ... because they’re living it every day, and they’re in there so they don’t

hear it anymore, they'd not actually identified that that was an issue so now they're moving space". (PCF Lead [23])

The completed audit tool or observations were then discussed or shared with the individual school. Feedback, recommendations and in some cases individual action plans were provided. A traffic light system was often used to indicate priority areas. In some instances, schools were able to access funding to purchase equipment and make reasonable adjustments or changes. Other project teams felt that the feedback received was an opportunity to approach school leaders and ask for change. Other teams were planning to return to each school to review what changes had been put in place and 'check and challenge' use of specific sensory areas within schools. Overall, the school staff were described as welcoming and engaged in the assessment process, and in some instances were able to demonstrate how much they had implemented.

"We designed a bespoke plan for them, really, and some of that involved the training modules, some of that involved some specific work with an OT or an Ed Psych, and they've all worked through that. And then, hopefully, by the end of term they'll all have had a follow-up learning walk to see what kind of progress they've made from beginning to end". (Project Lead [29])

One of the challenges associated with environmental assessments was securing the appropriate support and/or expertise to complete the necessary observations, as described below:

"What we were lacking here is any sort of educational psychology support for our school learning walks... getting the professionals on board here is quite challenging... their learning walks I think have been much smaller, in terms of the number of people engaged from across the system. I think they've had a similar issue around engaging colleagues from therapies and education psychology". (PCF Lead [28])

Environmental assessments were linked to other project activities, including training, PCFs and hearing children and young people's views regarding safe spaces in school. For example, school staff training sessions in most areas had covered sensory audits and the associated changes which could be made to classrooms. Furthermore, two of the educational psychologists, who were conducting audits within schools in one area, attended the PCF to ensure they understood both the school and parent carers perspectives. Finally, some project teams had opted to collate information and feedback from multiple project activities, including environmental assessments, into a single feedback report or bespoke plan for each school.

"we pulled together a feedback report, which includes the desktop review, the environmental audit, the parents' surveys and the practitioner surveys. And are giving some key recommendations out of that piece of work". (Project Lead [16])

3.1.5 Parent carer forum development & training

The National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF) is an independent Community Interest Company, which aims to deliver better outcomes for families living with SEND. The Department for Education provides grant funding for there to be a parent carer forum in all 152 local authority areas. Each of the nine PCF regions has a Representative, appointed to represent regional and local interests at a national level (9). The regional PCF network has been a key strategic partner in the original AiS pilot project in the North East since its inception (5).

In focus groups and interviews PCF involvement was reported across the majority of AiS project areas. In many areas, projects were led or co-produced with PCFs. In some areas

this was not the case, e.g., due to leadership being situated with another stakeholder organisation, or limited capacity within local PCFs:

"the Parent Carer Voice were involved from day one. They actually came to us and said, "Right, how are we going to form this? How is it going to be?" so we were involved right from the very first step of going into the schools, talking to the schools." (PCF Representative [49])

" Something happens randomly out of the blue so you can't always plan things definitely. It's the same for the parents that are trying to do the project... they want to do the project and they think it's fantastic and the ethos of it is really what we need in schools, it's the practicality of being able to do all the work involved because there's quite a lot of work in it which you don't think about at the beginning." (PCF Representative [27])

Most projects followed the North East model, undertaking work to develop 'mini' PCFs attached to schools engaged in the project. This worked well in some areas; however, it did not suit all geographies. For example, in one area, larger town-based forums were successfully developed:

"we're holding the parent mini forums. We've managed to do five within the project... We're having them every six to eight weeks... Initially, we only had one or two [parents], I've now got one that has up to fifteen parents turning up... this was more specific to that school. So the SENCO comes in, or a school leader comes in, or a TA comes in to that meeting. So we kept to that school so that, when they raise something, that person, the SENCO, will say, "Okay, we can take that away." (PCF Lead [13])

"rather than going into individual schools they settled into towns and so people came together in those towns and so we met them in a number of the schools that we were doing and also in the town hall which they have access to as well." (PCF Lead [30])

The success of school-based mini forums depended on the level of engagement of the school in the project, and the level of engagement of parents initially with the school, and then with forum activities. Delivery approaches had to be sensitive to this, as well as to local PCF capacity, particularly in areas without existing well-established networks. PCF representatives balance facilitating groups with a range of other responsibilities, and examples were discussed where feasibility had not been taken into account. This resulted in learning, for example about the need to involve PCFs in choosing schools to ensure pragmatic transport options for PCF representatives are considered. Where PCFs had limited capacity, some projects received support from outside their area, with experienced members of Contact or the PCF North East regional team facilitating.

"Other areas, they've been so pressured as a forum, they've not had the capacity. The national [team] from Contact have been our support in some of the other schools that we've been working in. And Contact themselves have gone the extra mile all the way, the representative from there has been really good." (PCF Project Lead [16])

Initially, new PCF facilitators took steps to listen and understand the experiences and needs of parent carers in the schools engaged in the project. Meetings were arranged, with facilitators using methods including informal group or 1:1 discussion, engagement activities, and surveys to gather information. Each meeting also served as an opportunity for parent carers to meet others whose Autistic children and young people attended the same or nearby schools, share information, ask questions, and receive signposting support from PCF leaders.

"it's about never ever, ever devaluing somebody's experience because that person needs to chat. So what we would do initially is, "This is what the project is about," and introducing the project. We allow the parents the time and the space to be able to talk at us a little bit because actually they've been talked at for a long time themselves" (PCF Lead [23])

"we wanted to survey the staff in schools first, to try and just tease out any issues that the parents and schools are seeing with the engagement with parents and parent participation. Also, what parents want from one of these involvement groups. We did the survey based on the survey that was sent over by the national team and from that we decided to do focus groups with parents... so that we can really hone in on some activities to do with those parents and make it quite bespoke... Then from that we'll pull all the feedback from both staff and parent surveys and their focus groups and then to talk to schools and work on setting up action plans" (PCF Lead [33])

The work of PCFs also extended to engaging with schools. PCF representatives provided feedback and worked with school teams to resolve issues on behalf of, and alongside parents. Many examples were given of school staff representatives (often SENCOs) engaging directly with PCFs, by attending meetings once school-based forums were established. In this context, the PCF role was to facilitate constructive communication between parent carers and school staff.

Many PCFs built upon peer support, listening, advice, and mediation activities with more formal training. Although there are often common themes which parents are interested in (such as neurodiversity and sleep, sensory needs and behaviour) a flexible approach to providing training responsive to parent-carer needs in each group was emphasised as important. Inclusivity in scheduling and delivering training was also highlighted – in some areas this had been achieved by training sessions being delivered online, whereas other areas valued the advantages brought about by face-to-face sessions.

"the tea mornings and things like that, that were organized for my sons school, were at ten o'clock in the morning and in the school hall. Number one, a lot of parents don't want to be in the same building as their Autistic child because it could set them off and be a real trigger for them if they happen to see them around the school. And also, for any of us that work, ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning just wasn't a time where we could do." (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

"I did the initial rounds of all the schools and asked the parents what they wanted, where they felt they wanted more information... We've done about six or seven different trainings so far... the big one, masking, because that was the one that every group mentioned... [we] sent it out to all the schools in the pilot, and within two days had got 50 places filled. So we'll have to run it again, to give it a good training base, you don't want them too big because if they're too big then parents don't interact the same... they can ask questions at the end, they use a chat, all of it was done online so it allowed everyone to access it. We kept it to an hour and fifteen, or an hour and a half, so it was kind of bite-size sessions... it was all on nights in the week... reaching the working parents" (PCF Lead [13])

In some areas, parent carers were invited to the same training sessions as school teams, while in other areas training was carried out for parent carers only. Advantages of this approach included visibly giving parents and school staff the same information and providing space for discussion. The majority of focus group and interview participants expressed it is important for staff to hear parent carer views. While some saw joint training as a way for staff to get an insight into challenges faced by parents, there was also

recognition across projects that parent-carers have different needs to staff which may not be entirely met by training.

"Obviously parents and carers have potentially a different set of needs from a training session than the professionals maybe... parents of children with special educational needs, quite rightly need that opportunity to be able to share their experiences and it's really important that us, as professionals, and certainly the class teachers who don't often get the opportunity to hear those views, it is really important." (SENCO [14])

It is important to mention that projects discussed were at different stages of PCF development. Some were slower to start due to delays in overall AiS project timelines, taking different approaches to gathering and analysing information about parents' needs, or encountering challenges engaging with schools or parent carers. To support parent carer engagement, some areas used remaining spaces on training courses as an opportunity to engage the wider community and took a targeted approach to spread news about the project.

"we had four schools that were struggling to engage parent and carers... [we] went in individually to meet with groups of parents... We've given them homework to go away and talk to other parents that they know of who are around that and they were all up for that as well, wanting to spread the message... we're in the process of trying to encourage some parent carers and some school champions to maybe do a video or a soundbite for us to use across the local offer and encourage more engagement from the schools and parent carers as well." (Local Authority Project Lead [37])

Case study: Co-production and parent carer leadership

In a project situated in an urban area in the North of England, a co-production approach to the AiS project was adopted, with PCF Representatives playing a central leadership role alongside Local Authority, Health and charity partners. Parent Carer Representative roles were advertised through existing PCF networks. AiS projects were aligned with core values and passions of those who applied – key motivations were having the opportunity to use their experience to improve services for Autistic children and young people in mainstream schools and to support and empower other parents.

"I've not worked for about five or six years like I say [to look after two children diagnosed with Autism]. Then I saw an advertisement on the PCF page for this project and I thought, "Wow, that's just me." I wasn't looking for a role but I just saw it and thought, "That's just me all over. I've got to do it." It was like operational and organising and projects but also Autism which has obviously suddenly become my world and a bit of my passion and helping mainstream schools because my daughter is at mainstream, my son is in SEND school so it was just perfect." (PCF Representative)

"I've been part of the Parent Carer Voice, Parent Carer Forum... probably I think about six years now. I got involved just because I didn't have a clue really what I was doing. I had absolutely no idea what to do, where to go, what support I needed... Then when the project for the Autism in Schools came along, my passion really is to just be with parents and to speak to other parents and to chat with them and to get their voices heard and to empower them to be able to, if they need to fight, be able to fight but just empower them to be a better parent or to enhance the parenting they're already doing and to give them support through peer groups for that. So when I heard about the project, I was just like, "Yes, I just want to be with those parents." (PCF Representative)

Once appointed, the Representatives were supported by regular catch-ups and ongoing support from an AiS Project Lead who has a dual role as a PCF Regional Lead in the now well-established pilot project. PCF representatives sit on AiS steering groups for their local area, alongside delivering PCF activities in their local schools. Involving PCF Representatives in all key decisions from the start was described as one of the project's biggest successes. For example, in conversations about which schools to engage in the project PCF Representatives were able to suggest schools where they were already in touch with parents about issues relating to Autism. In areas where project leads from other organisations left, PCF representatives were able to provide leadership and continuity to successfully progress project delivery.

"They have been driving the work forward... actually they lost their director halfway through this project and [PCF rep] carried it through... she had all of that knowledge because she'd always been at the table making the decisions on what the offer was going to be looking like rather than being told. I think that's one of the main successes in [area] for this year is that it has been truly equal in that it was never done to, and it was always done with." (PCF Lead)

To ensure purposeful delivery of PCF activities, an audit trail is kept, logging activities, next steps and the rationale. Activities to date have included meetings with coffee and cake focused on engaging, supporting and linking groups of parents whose children attend the same school and have Autism or additional needs. Training has been delivered based on group needs; e.g. in response to parent carer concerns about anxiety in young people relating to secondary school assessments a session was arranged with Kooth to cover wellbeing, stress, anxiety, triggers, and how to support. Email or WhatsApp groups have been set up for each school group for ongoing support between sessions. PCF representatives also aim to build constructive relationships between families and school staff, for example:

- providing constructive feedback to schools based on parent carer discussions
- facilitating conversations between SENCOs and parent groups
- facilitating individual meetings between parent carers and the school team to deal with issues promptly and prevent escalation.

Work has been undertaken to ensure PCF activities are inclusive and engage a diverse range of families – e.g. shortly after the project started, representatives realised meetings for cake and coffee were not aligned with needs of parent carers with English as a second language, many of whom were celebrating Ramadan. Further efforts were made to have conversations with these parents, understand their needs, and adapt – a Parent Carer Representative who speaks five languages now attends all parent groups to support with translation.

Project partners vary depending on which organisations work into each local area, but include CAMHS, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS), additional needs services, educational psychology, schools link teams and charity sector partners, as well as specialist and mainstream schools. This close partnership working has supported individuals and teams involved in the project to join up their work with families - e.g. sharing relevant learning from children and young people's groups with parent carers. Overall, the co-production approach was described very positively by parent carer representatives and charity partners, who discussed how it had generated real enthusiasm among all involved and raised standards.

"we start to find resolutions and ways around and then other services are coming in. It's been a really lovely experience so far but very much I think co-production is... when I first started, I was like, "What's this?" and now I know because actually it is a very supportive thing. It's like everybody wants to do it and I think that's what leads it because we're all actually really passionate about doing it. It's not just been a tick box anywhere along the line at all." (Parent Carer Representative)

"I think in all it's just been really beneficial. The fact that everybody has come together to do it has meant that I think we're driving things much faster than any other projects that have gone on previously because we've got that joint work. Actually everybody is linking in with everybody and we're all having those conversations." (Charity Partner)

3.1.6 Children & young people training & voice

Some of the AiS projects had chosen to engage children and young people in training and facilitated sessions. These sessions broadly aimed to help each child to understand themselves and their Autism, as well as enabling the child's voice to be heard and to understand what is important to them. The sessions were delivered by project partners such as local and national charities, young people from a youth action project, educational psychologists, staff from mental health support teams, specialist practitioners and local authority inclusion officers. Across the project areas, children and young people's sessions were offered to infant, primary and secondary schools. Sessions were often conducted in blocks of five or six, one per week, in place of usual timetable school activities. Sessions were typically an hour long and involved anything from six to 18 children per school.

Some of the project teams adapted the children and young people's training materials used in the initial AiS project in the North East. However, other project teams reviewed and adapted locally available materials or previously delivered Autism or neurodiversity focused sessions. Necessary adaptations had to be made to session content and activities for different age groups (i.e., primary/secondary school). Sessions covered many of the following topics and themes:

- Getting to know you – likes and dislikes, strengths, and challenges,
- Understanding the senses and sensory profile/needs,
- Exploring emotions and emotional sensory communication and thinking,
- Discussing the concept of an 'ideal school' and capturing pupil voice, including exploring sense of belonging and connection to school
- Aspirations and forward planning, skills for moving forward, adulthood and independence.

Facilitators reported that sessions were designed to be flexible, stimulate conversation and discussion, and build connections between the children and young people taking part. The facilitators endeavoured to adopt a sensitive and creative approach to the sessions, to create a safe or protected space in which children and young people felt comfortable and could contribute.

When delivering sessions, facilitators described implementing a range of theories and techniques such as the circle of Autism needs; Stop, Take a step back, Observe, Proceed mindfully (STOP) skills from dialectic behavioural therapy; planning alternative tomorrows with hope (PATH); the tree of life; zones of regulation; and solution focused problem solving. In addition, one group of facilitators had developed a character for younger children to externalise Autism, noting older children were able to use technology (e.g., laptops/tablets) to display information.

During sessions, children and young people were engaged in numerous activities and exercises including icebreakers, watching videos, use of coloured props (e.g., hoops, balls, or balloons) to represent the zones of regulation, emotions bingo, balloon tennis, completing outcome measures, and setting goals. Other session exercises involved designing a robot to celebrate difference/individuality, using a mirror box to identify likeable qualities, gingerbread men cut outs to describe positive school staff characteristics, and funnels and flour to demonstrate the concepts of resilience and tolerance. Sensory toys and equipment were also provided during some sessions to support engagement.

Most of the children and young people's sessions had been designed to ensure each child went away with a resource or work booklet, commonly referred to as a "communication passport". Each child's communication passport was about them, reflecting their individual needs, strategies they could use, or details of how others could help them. Information and learning were added to the passport session by session, and each child could share this resource with their family and other adults, including school staff. Some children were excited by the passports whereas others got more out of the activities during sessions, therefore there was no pressure to complete this document.

"This is a document that reveals who you are and the uniqueness of your profile and how best to get the best from you" (Charity Partner [21])

Teaching assistants and SENCOs were invited and/or required to sit in during the children and young people's sessions. In some instances, copies of sessional materials were provided to school staff, and emphasis placed on SENCOs attending specific sessions, e.g., sessions focused on problem solving, the future and next steps. One group of facilitators had designed their final session to ensure children and young people's voices were heard by school staff for joint understanding and discussion:

"Just to have a voice as well. Just to be able to talk about these things when they potentially might not have had a chance to talk about these things and that link with school as well, to make school better. We do a lot of doing reports and recommendations but having that young person and that member of staff there in the same room and then actually being able to say what it is that they like and dislike".
(Educational Psychologist [34])

For some projects, there was the intention that school staff who had been present during the children and young people's sessions would go onto deliver these sessions in the future. However, there was also the challenge raised that particularly in primary schools it was difficult to have a consistent member of staff present every week. Alternatively, a couple of project teams had opted for a different approach to children and young people's sessions, whereby staff had received training from a project partner (e.g., Daisy Chain) and those staff once trained had started delivering sessions for children and young people in their school or setting.

Overall, the children and young people who took part in these sessions were predominately selected by their school, where consideration had been given to the setting of the sessions and whether the child would cope, as well as the child's current stage on relevant pathways or if the child had a diagnosis. The facilitators interviewed reflected on this selection process as a challenge and suggested considerations for future children and young people's sessions. Facilitators of children and young people's sessions would welcome more information and insight into each child to prepare and problem solve in sessions as well as calling for the children and young people to have prior awareness of the sessions and a choice or ability to consent to take part.

It was also suggested consideration should be given to each child and their current circumstances to assess whether the training was occurring at an appropriate time:

“It might not seem like a massive deal to us but to that young person, what else are they going through at that moment? Because then coming to a group about Autism might just be the tipping point of, “I haven’t got the headspace to think about this right now.” Because even the time of year, I think, like coming up to summer holidays and transitions, potentially, for some of our young people this group required too much cognitive space from them” (Mental Health Practitioner [25]).

Age was suggested as a significant consideration for children and young people's sessions, with facilitators identifying it took more time to build rapport with the younger children, who may also find the end of regular sessions quite difficult. The need to ensure the pitch and tone of sessions is appropriate was also discussed, e.g., adapting materials and activities for different age groups. Another challenge related to age was how the students had been grouped for the children and young people's sessions, in some instances groups covered a range of ages, and one facilitator reflected this had made the group dynamic more challenging.

The environment in which the children and young people's sessions were being held could also pose difficulties, e.g., sessions being moved to a different classroom or into a classroom set up for exams. There were questions raised about whether children and young people's sessions should take place in the school setting and whether considering an alternative environment might increase attendance or open the offer up to more children and young people:

“we’ve had discussions this week about having additional sessions that aren’t held in school because obviously, we’re all aware how Autistic children might behave slightly different in school, because of their environment and how they relate to school” (PCF Lead [28]).

A final challenge related to diagnosis and the careful consideration needed to session content and members of the group. In one project area, facilitators had been asked by a primary school to deliver a session for the whole class on Autism, as the school had some children with a diagnosis who didn't know about their diagnosis:

“We attempted it but it wasn’t very successful, in the sense of it almost creates that divide by kind of, you bring Autism to life within the classroom and then those with Autism traits stood out...The knock-on effect of that was then the younger children going home and asking a lot of questions, which caused anxieties amongst parents. And overall, it didn’t feel appropriate, and it didn’t feel our place to be doing that” (Mental Health Support Lead [24]).

As result the facilitators had set revised boundaries for future children and young people's sessions and their role in the AiS project, clarifying that they were offering a service to young people who are Autistic and aware of their diagnosis.

3.1.7 Developing education and health support

Several AiS projects undertook work to develop ways of education, health and care professionals and services working together to support Autistic children and young people. Approaches to this included connecting and raising awareness of existing services, developing resources for schools, and provision of tailored or non-traditional support to school by professional services such as Mental Health Support Teams, Occupational Therapy and Educational Psychology.

Connecting services

Some project teams discussed working to raise awareness of services in their local area which support Autistic children and young people. This involved raising awareness of the AiS project and connecting this to other pilots or initiatives focused on Autism or neurodiversity, where possible. For example, in one area, the project lead described their work to connect services and avoid duplication:

“It’s in a whole suite of projects or developments that are going on...it’s about threading it together. It will be about me telling them, “Don’t deliver that because, actually, that’s happening over there. We need to bring people together.” So, it has an impact in that way, that we’re connecting it, it’s not sat on its own. So, it has got an impact, and the impact is that people are more aware around what’s going on because we’re connecting it for them (Project Lead [16]).

The project lead further elaborated on the work undertaken to respond to the identified needs of SENCOs in their local area, including bringing SENCOs together in a forum to upskill and enhance knowledge of what services are available, and how and when to refer to such external support.

In another project area, focus group participants reported how local knowledge and a collective approach had brought key stakeholders together and ensured relevant people and organisations were involved in the project:

“I’m the manager of several services that support children with special educational need or disability. So, we’ve got the SENDIASS service, we’ve got some short break services and we also have workshops that support parents and we do various other pieces of work that all relates to children with special educational need and disability. We’ve got an absolutely fantastic relationship with Parent Carer Voice and we’ve got quite good relationships with the local authority. So, at the point of doing this project, they asked if we’d work alongside various other people to support with the peer groups. So, our role in the project is to run those group sessions in schools and just support alongside everything else that’s going on” (Charity Partner [48]).

Similarly, in another project area, the PCF lead and local authority Autism advisor had worked to align the service offers from their local CAMHS and educational psychology services, and present one offer to the schools and avoid duplication.

Resource provision

The AiS project had provided dedicated time to develop resource provision for schools, teachers, parents and neurodiverse children and young people. For example, in one project area, an Autism advisory teacher had worked to develop a resource for individual children. As part of the development process, the AiS project had enabled the teacher to take the time to work with and compare resources with other local authority teams in the surrounding area. During the interview, the teacher acknowledged that the resource was a work in progress, but it had been shared with secondary schools in her area, training was being provided and feedback was being gathered from teachers, students, and parents. The teacher also reflected on key success factors for using this resource, which were focused on practitioner flexibility and creativity:

“I think from my experiences from this project, it’s really surprised me how kind of fixed a practitioner can be. It’s almost like well, this is what we do, you give us a resource and we just do the resource. No, it’s a tool, it’s a guide. One of the people I was talking to last week, she was like, so-and-so doesn’t want to write on it and I was like well, they don’t have to and I’ve already said that in the training. They don’t have to write. You can write, or you type, or you do post-its, however. You’ve got to be creative with

it because you're dealing with individuals. It's not just to sit, listen and write, because that's what they're struggling with in lessons anyway, so you don't want to give them more of the same. So yes, that's been interesting, the real fixed kind of thinking of the practitioners that have been running it". (Local Authority Specialist Teacher [22]).

As part of their ongoing AiS project work, two other project teams were working to develop a centralised digital or online resource. The first project team had developed a digital resource which was aimed at new school staff and held the numerous resources which had been generated during the first phase of their AiS project. The second project team had developed an online space, which was referred to as a "peer-learning network", where teaching assistants and SENCOs could share resources and learn from one another.

Tailored or non-traditional support from professionals or services

Across the AiS projects, there were several examples of professionals and services tailoring their usual approach or offering non-traditional support to schools, school staff, and neurodiverse children and young people. For example, in one project area the Mental Health Support Team had adapted their approach to provide support for children with SEN and had further adapted this approach for the AiS project. For the AiS project, the practitioners and psychologists within this team were working to deliver a different format of intervention (i.e., facilitating group work rather than one to one sessions) and collecting data for the project-level evaluation. Another example of non-traditional support being offered to schools was the work of an OT in one project area. When interviewed the OT reported that her brief was "quite broad", and she was asked to "go into schools and support schools at an environmental level to help neurodiverse students stay in school". The OT reflected upon how this differed from her normal role:

"Normally what I do is I'll assess children with their parents, write a report, that goes into school. Then I know, as a professional, that that report might get read and understood, it might not get read and understood. It's very debatable as to how much that gets implemented but working at this level and being able to go and have those direct discussions, that feels a lot more powerful and they're getting a lot more OT time to go through the theory of why we're saying what we're saying. So yes, it feels positive". (OT [02])

As the above quote demonstrates, the OT felt this change to her role had been a positive one and further reported that due to a historic lack of access SENCOs had been "really motivated and excited to have an OT on site" and "thrilled that an OT is in the building, listening and giving advice" (OT [02]). The OT did acknowledge that she thought she would be asked to provide consultations on students, however these requests did not materialise, and she was able to focus on her area of expertise offering a whole school approach to creating supportive environments.

Similarly, a senior educational psychologist and trainee educational psychologist in another area had found the AiS project had meant a deviation from their typical work (i.e., case work, preventative work & EHCPs) to delivering children and young people's sessions into secondary schools:

"I think as a psychologist you write lots of reports and you feel like you're trying to build a picture and let people understand that young person. I wanted that but with the young people being at the centre of it where they get to think about how they think, why they think how they think, how they interact with their environment and for them just to have space to reflect on that I think and to get to know themselves a bit better I think." (Educational Psychologist [34])

In another project area, a member of the mental health support team had created individualised resources for each child and tailored the resources to their likes and interests. Some of the resources focused on learning how to express emotions with aid of a character on YouTube or creating an accurate image of one's family, rather than using a stock image. Positive feedback had been received from parents. Of importance, this was an example of both the resources created by the AiS project in one area and professionals being afforded the flexibility to work out with their traditional approach, as summed up below:

"I think what was good from the off was that what was actually written in the initial contract, in the initial brief was not binary. It wasn't the boundaries of the project because when the job was presented to me, I said, "Yes, but I'm not doing anything it says in that contract because it just is not the way things need to be done."...Just from my own experience of working with children with additional needs, there's no two that are the same so it didn't make any sense to do it like a one size fits all approach. So, I'm glad we didn't. I think another positive right from that beginning is that we've had the backing of our managers and team leaders supporting our adaptability. The only reason I've been able to create all of these resources is because I was allowed to do so. I am notoriously known as a rogue but there's limits to even being a rogue when you're under another service and things have got to be approved". (Engagement and Participation Worker [40])

Finally, a specific challenge was highlighted with regards to the creation of resources and sharing these widely. More specifically, it was identified that a more flexible and open approach to sharing resources, regardless of ownership or authorship, was required to ensure maximum benefit for children and young people:

"I think one of the things that I've learnt from this project is, I'm quite flexible and quite open to everybody having all and everything, just to help the pupils, help kids. Whereas I think some people find that really difficult, and it's theirs. No, the whole point of the project is to do something to share, to help, and I think some people find that really difficult". (Local Authority Specialist Teacher [22]).

Case study: Library book club

One of the projects set up a library book club. The project team approached four local libraries and asked if books on Autism and neurodiversity could be stocked in each library. Members of the project team reviewed over 40 relevant books, visited the libraries, and identified other titles, already present in the library, which could be included. These books are now arranged together in a specific section on SEN and neurodiversity. The library book club was launched in Autism Awareness week and advertised at pop-up events in schools.

Through the book club, the project team aimed to provide access to these reading materials and resources whereby anyone could extend their knowledge of Autism and neurodiversity:

"So, it's not just obviously the families themselves or the child or young person, it's siblings, it's grandparents, it's professionals. We've got a huge range of books available". (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead)

Furthermore, the books were available in public libraries which meant the books were accessible to the community, not just those connected to the schools who were taking part in the project. Training had also been provided to librarians and library staff:

"They had a little bit of training as well from the special advisory service who came along to the book club pop-up events with me which has been fabulous because

then obviously with the small activity sessions that the libraries have, they've got some more understanding and awareness of Autism and neurodiverse conditions. So, they are far more aware". (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead)

The project team hoped the book club would be a flexible and leisurely resource for children and young people and families:

"You can do this and this in your own home at your leisure and there's nobody going to test you about it or ask you questions afterwards. This is just something for you which parents find enormously empowering as well to be able to... sometimes as well they can go into school and say, "I've read this book. I want to discuss it with you."" (PCF Lead)

Outcomes from the library book club

The project team had received positive feedback about the library book club, stating that the resources provided had been "welcomed" and contributed to parents, carers and children being more informed:

"People want that because they want to be able to go to the local libraries, find out, inform themselves a little bit more because obviously the more informed they are, the more they can be the advocate for the child and young person but also for them to be able to understand maybe why they're not the friend who sits next to them in class or what the difference is". (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead)

The project team also reported the books were educational for siblings and had helped with family discussions about Autism and neurodiversity:

"One of the parents in particular said, "I just don't know how to explain to a child's sibling why their brother or sister responds in such a way or what the triggers are," but obviously being able to take them to the library, for them to get books that they choose as well, which they connect with, it gives them a better understanding". (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead)

There were also instances of library staff putting the training they had received into practice by helping a family;

"Last week I was in a meeting actually with somebody from the library and she said that there was a family with quite specific needs but because they'd had the training and they'd been part of the book club and the pop-up events, they could help them, they could assist which the feedback from that is just phenomenal because obviously it's not just the schools that we've been able to reach, we've reached a wider variety of different services". (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead)

When discussing the book club at schools, project team members found they were inspiring school staff to read relevant titles and discuss what they had read with other staff. One of the project team recalled the following conversations with a head teacher:

"One of the head teachers yesterday, she was saying the summer holidays is the only time she actually gets to read a book but she had read this "Uniquely Human" book and really loved it and found lots of information in it that was useful to her. So, she is going to set up a book club WhatsApp for other professionals and they are going to look at a book and read part of it and then discuss." (PCF Lead)

4 Outcomes of Autism in Schools projects

4.1 Expected outcomes

The long-term aim of AiS projects is to prevent or reduce school exclusions, out of area placements, education-residential placements, and inappropriate movement into specialist settings including CAMHS inpatients for Autistic children and young people. The initial project was developed to address an identified need for tangible improvements in services available to Autistic children and young people and their families, who may not meet criteria for statutory services.

AiS projects rolled out in 2021/22 and began delivering project activities in the Spring and Summer terms. This evaluation was carried out in the Summer term, while projects were still at an early stage of delivery. Therefore, this evaluation focuses on early outcomes, and baseline data.

An outcome mapping exercise was carried out based on content in the initial project specification and pilot project evaluation reports, as shown in Table 3. This focused on key stakeholders, engagement with the project and tangible outcomes expected for these groups; to inform qualitative evaluation of early project outcomes.

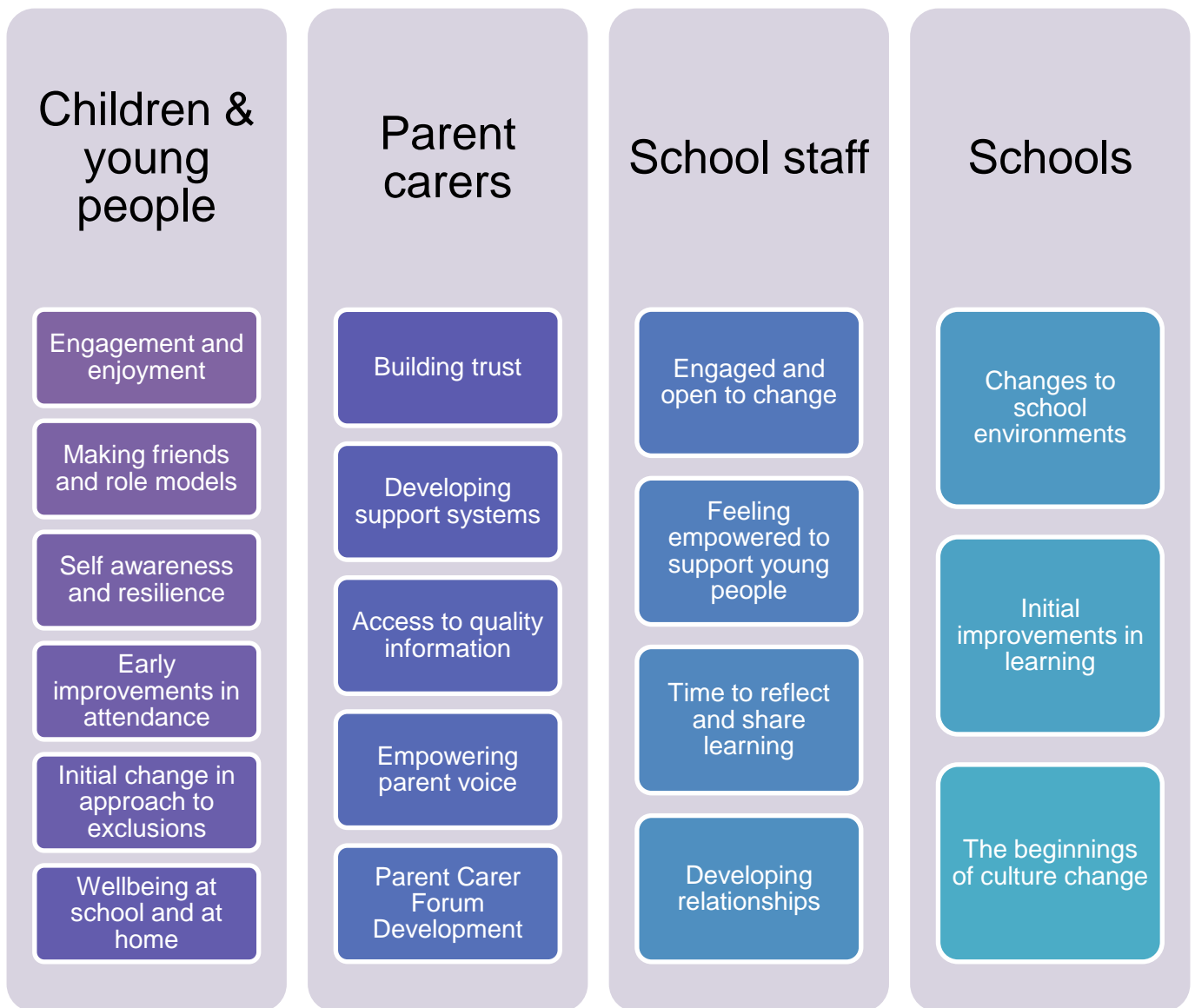
Table 3 Expected outcomes of Autism in Schools projects based on stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder	Engagement with project	Expected outcomes	
Schools	Commitment from senior leaders Adapted policy/guidance Organisation development plan promotes positive Autism support/practice	Culture change	Improvement in attendance Reduction in isolation Reduction in exclusions Awareness/acceptance across school community Continue to make improvements
	Environmental assessment/review Autism Capable Environment	Improved environment	
	Co-produced enhanced support for children and families Early intervention pathways developed	Support offer developed New ways of working with children or families	Improved resilience
School staff	Changes to teaching practice Reasonable adjustments recognised and implemented for students Personalised approaches implemented	Improved knowledge & understanding	Improved relationships with students Improved relationships with families
Parents/carers	Involved in co-production Child's needs recognised and supported Strategies from training implemented	Improved knowledge & understanding Develop and strengthen relationships	Understand their own strengths & challenges More self-aware, confident and resilient
	Peer to peer support Engagement with school/CAMHS	Improved support	Reduction in isolation More resilient Improved health, wellbeing and quality of life Improved relationship with school staff
Children and young people	Involved in training/activities	Improved knowledge & understanding	Understand their own strengths & challenges More self-aware, confident and resilient
	Recognised and supported	Improved support	Improvement in educational, health, wellbeing & social outcomes. Improved quality of life

4.2 National outcomes

Early outcomes of AiS projects were grouped into themes by stakeholder group, as shown in Figure 1. This section describes and expands on these themes, based on focus groups and interviews with school staff and parent/carers who were involved, or had children involved in project activities; and individuals from organisations involved in project co-design, development, or delivery.

Figure 1 Qualitative outcomes for key stakeholder groups.



4.2.1 Outcomes for children and young people

Children and young people directly engaging in and enjoying AiS activities was reported by participants in focus groups and interviews. Overall, participants considered the outcomes of the project for children and young people to be making friends, having role models, improved self-awareness and resilience. In some areas, early signs of improvements in attendance, reduced exclusions, and improvements in wellbeing at school and at home were also reported.

Engagement and enjoyment

Where projects delivered activities such as information or discussion sessions directly with groups of children and young people, their engagement and enjoyment of these activities was reported by project teams, school staff, and parents. This was based on focus group and interview participant observation of neurodiverse children and young people actively contributing, as well as formal and informal feedback received from those who took part.

"what we have seen is engagement from children that haven't engaged at all... we had that young lad... he had some challenges around executive function, but he participated wholly in those sessions and engaged... people were coming into the room and saying, "Wow, we can't believe that this is the same child." We hear that quite often" (Charity Partner [21]).

The importance of effective communication, and sensitive tailoring activities for successful engagement was discussed in several focus groups. Effective communication between project teams, schools and families is required to ensure all eligible children and young people can choose whether to attend, to pitch sessions at the right level and make appropriate adjustments. Discussions demonstrated there is no 'one size fits all' approach to successful engagement. Participants reflected on ways in which activities were adapted to support young people to engage, e.g., supporting young people time to be present at sessions without engaging directly, and supporting individual communication needs.

"we all went together talking about this participation work and we heard so many times, "Well this child, they won't engage with you. This child, they struggle. This child can't communicate very well." We've made it clear from the start that communication is not going to be a barrier as much as possible. If that child only communicates through PECS [Picture Exchange Communication System], Makaton, we'll work with them. Those are the voices we want to capture." (Assistant Psychologist [38])

Engaging children and young people in AiS activities was associated with hearing and sharing the voice of Autistic children and young people. Participants discussed that young people had learned strategies for self-regulation, participated in collective problem-solving, and begun to support each other in ways which had not been seen previously.

"certainly the most joyful part of the entire process has been bringing a group of young people together, sort of vertically grouped, because of similarities in their profile and their neurodiversity... we had got a group of mixed and interesting, diverse and energetic young people that share certain neuro-traits and characteristics, and it's led to some really fantastic discussions. It's not taken long to build trust. I would say maybe after the first couple of sessions we found that children of all ages were opening up, were supportive of each other... through discussion, support, empathy, and deep listening, we were able to solution-plan for a lot of those young people, which was absolutely fantastic." (Charity Partner [21])

In most cases, activities were delivered with small groups of neurodiverse children and young people. However, some projects delivered sessions collectively with neurodiverse and neurotypical children and young people. Some evaluation participants found engaging neurotypical and neurodiverse young people in an ambassador scheme supported engagement for neurodiverse individuals, with potential for a relational approach to promote acceptance of difference more widely within school communities. The point was made that this collective approach worked well for some young people who did not want to stand out as being neurodiverse. However, it was also noted a whole class approach could have a detrimental effect if neurodiverse children are unaware of their diagnosis (see section 3.1.6).

Making friends and role models

Where AiS project activities were delivered with neurodiverse children and young people, focus group and interview participants reported activities helped young people to build friendships and connections. This was most commonly associated with introducing young people to each other within a supportive and safe space, leading them to realise they have neurodiversity in common. Making other neurodiverse students visible helped children and young people know they were not alone, and that there are others who also feel "different". Building of connections was also a focus for sessions delivered with groups involving both neurodiverse and neurotypical young people, with student-led conversations, promoting relational approaches and embracing differences.

"A young person bravely shared their experiences of the challenge they find when making friends... They didn't think they had any friends. Another person said, "Oh no I'm your friend." That was lovely. So, it was creating that safe place as well where young people can really explore and know that they're not alone." (Charity Partner [04])

Participants shared feedback from schools about social support networks developing from friendships built through AiS activities. These were associated with knowing they had neurodiversity in common, as well as social support and relationship-building activities delivered in some sessions delivered with children and young people.

"We did kind of mention right at the start about, "Wouldn't it be amazing to think about setting up peer mentoring and things within the school?" But what we didn't necessarily think about is actually that group just suddenly being in a room and saying, "Oh, you've got Autism as well." Actually just starting that conversation and then getting feedback from the schools that, "The young people are now talking to each other in the playground. They didn't know each other five weeks ago, and now they're sharing stories in the playground, or they're supporting each other if they're having a bad day." So I think that has been the biggest thing which has come out, which actually we didn't go into this expecting that outcome, but it's amazing that it has." (Mental Health Support Lead [24])

"she didn't realise there were any Autistic children in the school so for her, I mean she's six and she said to me, "Did you know there were other children in our school who are Autistic?" For her now, that's just like, "Wow, there's somebody like me out there." ... It's [the programme] all about I'm different and it's fine and this is who I am. That's really empowered her to look after the younger children and keep an eye out for them." (Teacher & Inclusion Manager [08])

Examples were shared of children and young people being empowered to take on leadership roles and support others during group activities delivered as part of the project. This involved answering questions, problem solving and role modelling how to overcome barriers for group members who were younger, or more recently diagnosed.

"in one of the secondary schools that I worked in a few of them were relatively early in their journey, recently diagnosed, so actually they had a lot of questions. And a lot of the other streams and older years who had been diagnosed had more understanding of what Autism was, they were able to support and engage with them. And that was a really positive experience to see as well... And there was one [young person], I believe it was in Year 10, in one of the secondary schools, who really took on a leadership role within that group. And was able to support the other young people, even within sessions, supporting them with writing down and things like that. And it was them demonstrating that it doesn't have to be a barrier, there's lots of ways to be able to manage whatever paths they might find more difficult." (Assistant Psychologist [26])

Several participants also identified that children and young people had developed friendships due to improvements in social communication and confidence engaging with their peers. This was associated with changes to the school approach and environment making young people feel more comfortable, as well as AiS activities with children and young people. For example, in one primary school, parents and teachers recognised an improvement in social development and engagement among Autistic children and young people who are now being taught in class, where previously they were taught in isolation from their peers. In another school, positive benefits were associated with setting up a social group for neurodiverse young people.

"we started up some social groups because that is something, you think that they have loads of social opportunities, but they don't have the opportunities to be taught some of these social cues and stuff... at first, they really hated it... but now they actually are so excited to turn up, and they're really enjoying the sessions... they turn up together now, they don't turn up separately, they all arrive together." (Assistant SENCO [12])

In some projects, activities were delivered by neurodiverse adults or young people. Where activities involved a neurodiverse facilitator, this was viewed as giving young people relatable role models for the future. Other project areas were considering this approach in future and one pupil had made this suggestion to a team of education psychologists.

"I have only had really positive feedback about the young people's sessions that they've been invited to, and their engagement, mostly around for those sessions the fact that they're being delivered by an Autistic adult. And so that child can really relate to that person... the young people have been in awe... And seeing them in their adult roles, I think, and their adult lives, and being able to see that they are working, and coming to talk to them. And so that's been really helpful." (PCF Lead [28])

Case Study: Workshops for young people by young people

In one project in the south of England, a charity partner organisation delivered training to children and young people in schools, as part of the AiS project.

The charity works on an existing youth action project run for and by young people with disabilities aged eleven to 25 years. There are approximately 60 members, many of whom have experience of being excluded from school or being on limited timetables. Members attend youth sessions, attend community events, produce media and deliver training to schools and professionals to raise awareness of disabilities.

Ten young leaders from the project designed a package of training and workshops based on feedback they gathered from young people about issues experienced in school including lack of safe spaces, communication with staff, feeling alone, and not understanding neurodiversity. Schools were asked to identify neurodiverse children and young people who could benefit from attending an hour-long workshop. As of June 2022, workshops with children and young people were either delivered or arranged in 14 schools; scheduling sessions has proved challenging with sessions planned to continue in 2022-23.

Although accompanied by a youth worker, workshops are entirely delivered by five young people. Young leaders share their stories including experiences from school and where they are now, e.g. at work or university, showing that *"even though they might have struggled in a school setting, there is light at the end of the tunnel"* (Charity Partner). The children and young people participate in interactive tasks which support

them to identify their strengths, things they find difficult, and qualities they like about themselves.

Feedback from workshops delivered to date suggests they have created safe spaces for young people to explore who they are, learn that they are not alone, and to relate to the young people delivering the session as positive role models for the future. The process has also benefitted the young leaders; they have developed their skills to work as a team, be organised, and present to children and young people. In addition, the project has given them a platform to share their story, and the opportunity to reflect on their progress as individuals.

"What I think work really well is that it's been led by young people who have experienced similar things. I think that's just so powerful. I think it's a two-way thing, so it's a winner-winner. You've got the young people in the schools that are really struggling to know who they are. They're gaining something out of it by meeting these older young people and realising that things could be okay, that they've got the same disability or whatever, and that they can really relate." (Charity Partner)

Self-awareness and resilience

Sessions with groups of children and young people carried out as part of the AiS project were perceived as having improved young people's understanding of their Autism. This was linked with sessions which provided information and a chance to ask questions, alongside normalising and celebrating neurodiversity.

"He really struggled before with the idea of being different to his peers and he's never wanted to stand out. It is the same now that he doesn't want to stand out, but he understands that his brain works in a different way... it didn't seem to matter as parents how much we tried to instil that in him. I think he needed someone to come in, in a different way and explain that to him" (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

"It was normalising it. Especially those young persons who said, "I never quite understood what Autism was, it was quite a scary thing."" (Assistant Psychologist [26])

Several participants noted project work with young people to identify coping strategies, and what they would improve about school had helped them to identify self-support strategies. It was reported that students had begun to use the tools and strategies discussed to manage challenging situations in school. Students' ability to confidently communicate about their needs within sessions was also linked with potential to self-advocate for their needs in future.

"actually it's really uncomfortable just to ask people outright [what reasonable adjustments they need]. So, they feel it's easier when you give them a scenario and a character, and then problem solve that as a group. What do you think they should do, what would you suggest? And I felt that's what brought up so much of the group discussions, and then people got more confident, going, "Well actually, I'm doing this."" (Mental Health Practitioner [25])

There was some early evidence that consistent environmental changes within schools and improved resilience linked to AiS project activities had resulted in some easier transitions from classroom to classroom. Some focus group and interview participants anticipated easier transitions from year group to year group. This is consistent with feedback from the North East, where the AiS project is well established, and easier transitions from primary to secondary school were reported. Participants linked the project to improved transitions work, and children being better prepared.

"I have noticed in the Autism Schools Project schools that the transitions have been a lot easier and kind of have flowed better because there's such a nice flowing structure between the different places now. So, the environment between classrooms and year groups isn't massively different anymore, because they're able to follow the same rules about what their classrooms look like or how their day is structured. And they've got all of that additional information on how to make it a smoother transition for those pupils as well, those children that have all these social communication difficulties where transition is just this massive thing for them." (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

Early improvements in attendance

Some participants in focus groups and interviews reported early signs of improvements in attendance for Autistic children and young people, including in cases of emotional-based school avoidance. For example, in one area a parent reported reduced emotional-based school avoidance on days where their child attended AiS project group sessions. This was supported by more general adaptations in the school environment, reducing challenging situations and sensory triggers.

"He was initially quite hesitant about it. We have a lot of emotional based school avoidance with him, he suffers from anxiety quite a bit. And so, anything new coming into his school day was originally a big no... But from that very first session where he went in, they made him feel so comfortable... we found we had hardly any school avoidance on a Thursday because he was so excited about going in." (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

In another area, improvements in attendance across schools engaged in AiS projects was reported by the project team. In one of these schools, staff linked more time in class, greater attendance and better punctuality specifically with implementing individual plans to reduce stress accumulation during the school day.

"there's been significant improvement for some of those chronic non-attenders who haven't been in school at all and have now been in regularly since this programme picked up. Which again are pretty grand outcomes, really, in such a short space of time". (Project Lead [29])

Tools and resources, such as communication passports had also allowed children to successfully communicate with teachers, for example enabling a child to be understood and to spend more time in school than previously.

Initial change in approach to exclusions

Similarly, some early signs of change in school approaches to exclusions were also reported. Examples were described to evaluators, where children and young people were on the cusp of being excluded however the training and support available at the time of the AiS project meant an alternative outcome occurred. In one project area, those interviewed described a period of reflection and change to common practices or normal patterns of exclusion in a participating school. School staff attending workshops and training sessions about Autism and neurodiversity were thought to have been through a powerful learning process and changed their approach. This included reaching out to professionals they were aware of through the project to seek help and support when considering excluding a child.

"One of the head teachers of a school in the project phoned me after school one day and she said, "I need to talk things through with you. I'm about to permanently exclude a child," and I said, "Alright, bring it on." I said, "Okay, so talk me through what happened". As we were talking, the head teacher said, "Yes, we didn't do that right, did we? No. We could have done that better. Ah yes, I see what effect that action must have had, yes. Okay." They ended up not excluding at all and planning the

reintegration meeting so that the young person could talk about how they felt about what had happened to them and they could plan a way forward together. So, it's a very qualitative example but one I'm rather proud of actually". (Staff Trainer [03])

In another area, a change in approach to exclusion was linked to the AiS project team supporting communication between the parent of a young person who had been excluded and school team. Several meetings were held, and the parent and school team worked together daily to discuss and trial solutions to support the young person to return to school.

Wellbeing at school and at home

Improvements in wellbeing for children and young people while at school were associated with a range of AiS project activities. These included environmental adaptations; personalised support and reasonable adjustments; and children and young people's sessions. Parents and school staff across a range of project areas reported children and young people were more relaxed, comfortable, and happier in school.

"the way that the school is now adapting itself to make it a more comfortable environment for him is that I can see the change as a parent definitely in how happy he is there and how willing he is to be in that school environment." (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

An example from the North East of a child successfully moving from specialist provision to thrive in a mainstream school suggests there may be potential for these kinds of outcomes to be replicated in other areas over time.

"my little girl hadn't played out on a breaktime for over three years [in specialist provision school]. She used to go into something on a lunchtime... children with social communication needs who didn't cope with playtime and social time, would just go and sit. What they've [new mainstream school] realised is that she doesn't cope well with unstructured time, so they play games of cricket and other things. She's still out on playtime. She comes home on a night now she's like, "The boys love me because I'm a great fielder, mum." She's actually out playing." (PCF Lead [23])

Across several areas PCF leads reported children and young people being more relaxed in school also led to them being calmer at home. This had led to improvements in family life for the child, their siblings and parents – from spending more quality time and being comfortable talking about school, to experiencing less physical and emotional distress. For example, at one school, it was reported that three families had stopped accessing respite care.

"By improving the child's experience in those six hours I'm actually improving the child's whole life and improving your siblings and parents and everything. What I've actually seen now is that in three cases I had families where some of the children and their siblings were accessing respite and now they don't need that, don't want that because the actual family life is now settled, that the child is going home calm" (Teacher & SENCO [10])

Focus group and interview participants reported improved communication within families as a positive outcome of the AiS project. This was associated with children feeling calmer in school and using strategies learned at school at home.

"there was one parent yesterday who... was like, "You sent him home with this resource and it's actually working." So he could explain his emotions based on Mr Beast, the You Tube star, which this child absolutely loves... he's created a resource package individualised for this child so he can express his emotions. He does it at home now. So actually he's got continuity from the school and home using the same resource" (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead [41])

AiS teams working with the child, their parent carers and their school simultaneously to join up work across families and improve communication was highlighted by staff from one project.

"it might be that the young person's views were very different to what the parent thought and we've been able to work with that as well because sometimes we do, as parents, we think it's what we want and a lot of the time it's not what the young people want." (PCF Representative [49])

4.2.2 Outcomes for parent carers

AiS project activities were considered to have already gone some way towards building trust between parent carers and project teams, and parent carers and schools. Outcomes of the project for parents also included developing support systems, providing better access to quality information and empowering parents to make their voices heard. In addition, PCF development supported as part of the project was associated with some wider positive outcomes for these networks and those they support.

Building trust

PCF leads shared the importance of building trust for parent carers of Autistic children and young people. This is particularly important because challenges accessing appropriate support can result in parents losing confidence in the ability of education, health, and social systems to effectively address their child's needs. Although AiS projects are still at an early stage, participants in focus groups and interviews reflected they had already gone some way towards building trust via PCFs working with parents and school staff. Listening first, and delivering work based on parent carer needs was highlighted as a strength.

"I think we're being led by the parents and that's really, really key. We're delivering what the parents need or what's coming out in conversations rather than us thinking, "Let's have a structure,"" (PCF Representative [47])

Project teams reflected that the more projects deliver for children and their families, the more parent carer trust in the project grows; and that from this, parent carer confidence in schools can be established or re-established.

"In the hearts and minds really of our parents and carers... For me, I feel that's where we've probably had the biggest win as part of the project so far... I think they are becoming much more confident that this is actually going to make a difference whereas before they were coming along to see what was going on, but their expectations were low." (Project Lead [42])

There was a general consensus among focus group and interview participants that communication between schools and parents had improved and been made more constructive by PCF involvement. PCF leads also reflected that involvement of school staff in meetings also supported to tailor support to parents.

"I don't know obviously about what happens in the school... having [school] staff there who can understand what they're [parents] talking about, about their specific schools and the technology or the way people communicate has really helped me to be able to support the parents and because we're all working together, that's made it easier." (PCF Lead [07])

There was a mixed picture when it came to direct communication between schools and parent carers more generally; while improvements were reported in some schools, in others it was suggested that parents unable to attend PCF meetings noticed no change. School staff proactively planning support for children and communicating these plans with

parents also built parent carer confidence that schools were willing and able to support their child's needs.

"every time I write an individual plan for a child and while some of them are similar, they're all written to consider the child individually, I'll meet with the teacher. I'll also meet separately with the family. This is anecdotal at best, but I believe that one of the successes has been that when the parents see the real depth of work that's gone into this and the care that's gone in and how obvious it is, how deeply we know their child, I think things improve just because the parents are relaxed. I think there been instances where parents have been, "I don't know what to do, and nobody else seems to be helping" whereas now, I'll put before them maybe a 13-point plan across three or four pages and they say, "my god this speaks to my child". The parents then relax into a feeling that the school has capacity to be helpful." (Teacher & SENCO [10])

Developing support systems

Attendance at PCF meetings was associated with improvements in the depth and breadth of support available to parent carers. Project teams reported parent carers developing supportive relationships with each other as a result of meeting via these groups. These relationships were often informal, ranging from a smile and nod in the playground to show shared understanding and social support, to parent carers continuing discussions and becoming friends. Examples were also shared of parent carers identifying opportunities to support each other more formally, linking with others via PCFs or progressing their ideas by taking on leadership roles.

"We've had tearful parents in the meetings saying they didn't realise there were other parents and linking up. Quite often during the meeting they will say, "Can we swap numbers after," or quite often when we leave [school], there is the group, they all stand and talk, don't they, outside which is nice. In the second cohort we're working with [school] which is a secondary ... We had Year 7 and 8 parents and they're really keen to support the Year 6 parents going through the transition to secondary. I mean that's obviously early days but we're trying to link them up at the moment... hopefully long term in the project, that could be a real benefit, having the secondary parents supporting the primary parents because I think quite often that is a worry, the transition into secondary school." (PCF Lead [07])

The role of PCFs and schools in being able to answer questions, signpost to services, and address issues quickly was highlighted. AiS projects were seen to have developed relationships between parent carers, forums and schools, improving awareness of who to approach for support. In addition, a range of AiS projects held information sessions about further support available for Autistic children and young people and their families in the area.

"So those parents now know yes, they can go and speak to their SENCO, yes, they can speak to the person whose next to them, but they can also if they're looking for something about transport or something that the school can't help with, then there is a forum and they know about it now." (PCF Lead [30])

"each school has got its own WhatsApp group now for the parents of the parent groups. I think that's already showing benefit. We had a parent on Friday who commented in and said, "Could someone just ring me?" So we've been able to now get back to that parent, look at the issue within the school and now we're able to get a meeting together and try and resolve that issue. Now if they hadn't put in that group, I just think that would have escalated and by Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of this week we've got a much bigger problem. Whereas now, just because the parent was

able to share their worry, share their concern, I just feel you've been listened to now and let's see what we can do about it." (PCF Representative [49])

Access to quality information

AiS project training and information sessions were viewed as having provided parents with good quality information. Participants in focus groups and interviews noted these had improved parent carers knowledge and understanding of specific topics relevant to neurodiversity such as masking, Autism in girls, and sleep. Many projects had also held sessions for parents about the local support offer for children, young people and families with Autism, in some cases delivered directly by local service representatives.

"It's being aware as well. The whole Tools for Schools, showing the parents about the local offer and where to go and look. They found that... because they were just like, "I didn't know this existed. I didn't know there was all this support," especially in [area] I think it has a really good support network and so they were really surprised at actually what was out there." (Teacher & Inclusion Manager [08])

"our community paediatric teams are going to come and deliver sessions to families, pastoral teams in schools are going to come and deliver sessions to families. SENDiass are delivering sessions to families. So it's looking at your networks of support you already have and calling on them to come and support people, parents and carers." (PCF Representative [47])

Sessions about reasonable adjustments were also considered to have met an important need. While many parent carers were aware of Education Health and Care Plans and specialist school provision, projects teams had identified reasonable adjustments as a key knowledge gap for parent carers and schools.

"from talking to parents, it seems to me that the very beginning level support, the SEN support, isn't within school. You have to really know that you are allowed to have that support, and you're allowed to ask for these reasonable adjustments. And your child should be allowed to attend school if these things are put in place... It's really quite important that all those things are ironed out at the beginning." (PCF Lead [28])

"It's nice for us to be able to reassure the parents because I think a lot of parents are under the illusion their children have to go to a special school and have to have an EHCP whereas going round to all these schools, I've seen amazing practice that they're delivering. As a parent carer myself, I can say that I've seen that they're making reasonable adjustments and they're doing this and having sensory audits." (PCF Lead [07])

Analysis suggests a key strength of the AiS project approach is the balance between information being shared between parent carer experts by experience and professional experts. Individuals reflected that sometimes information shared could be incorrect or not applicable to another family's situation, highlighting the important role of PCFs in challenging information.

"I mean I've met lots of professionals on this journey but I think the most important information I've had has been from other parents, the most vital bits have been from other parents telling me different things. We've already found that in the project really, that peer support, that other parent having gone through something similar is amazing. So that's why I got involved in the project. I've got to be honest, I've absolutely loved it so far, having that time in those groups." (PCF Representative [49])

Empowering parent voice

PCF activities delivered as part of the AiS project were identified to have empowered parents to ask questions and voice concerns. This was linked to the role of PCFs in communicating with schools on behalf of parents.

"I think, parents will either be very fighty or they will not, and they will just be quiet and sit. Because they don't want whatever they're going to be arguing about to impact their young person who's in that school. So, to have the support of the forum there gives it that kind of like, "Well, if you have a concern and you tell me, I can take that concern to your school and your Headteacher. You don't have to do it." It's kind of that more sort of, it's given them a bit more strength, really, to be voicing what they're concerned about." (PCF Lead [28])

Having space and time to speak and be heard in a supportive environment was also associated with some parents feeling more able to advocate for themselves and their children.

"this particular mum suffers hugely with anxiety... She attended yesterday with another parent... All the time she was shaking but she actually verbalised what she wanted to say... She went, "I've got a wall. It's about taking a brick off at a time." ... it was so heart-warming and I got a little bit emotional that she felt so confident to be able to take herself out of her comfort zone and actually attend this for her child. She said, "I'm here. What else is out there for my son? What can I do to make sure that he gets everything that he needs?" She did say to me, she went, "I felt quite empowered because you listened to me... The more that I spoke to her, we just saw her whole body change. Then she was laughing and then she started talking to other parents." (Local Authority Parent Engagement Lead [41])

"I think the big thing was that parents were coming with negative experiences but they were coming with a really positive attitude. I think we actually did the first forum where we didn't invite the school champions so that parents and carers felt that they could just sound off or be very open and say what they wanted to say without putting, should we say a spoke in the wheel, that burnt that relationship with the school champions. However, we didn't need to do it. They were fab. They were quite honest about experiences but not in a negative way." (Local Authority Project Lead [37])

In several areas, focus group and interview participants pointed to examples of PCF members planning or beginning to become PCF leaders. In one area, PCF representatives co-produced and led their AiS project at a local level, working alongside local authority colleagues to make key decisions from the start. This local parent carer leadership was described as one of the project's biggest successes.

Parent carer forum development

Across AiS projects, some areas had made more progress with developing PCFs than others. PCF Leads reflected that their involvement in the project had positive impacts for the forums, funding delivery of work they would otherwise have been unable to do. It also raised awareness of their offer among parent carers, schools, and project partners such as local authorities. Where this was the case, PCF membership had grown, through extending their offer and linking directly with schools. In some areas, this was associated with increased ethnic and cultural diversity within PCFs, which was welcomed by forums as an opportunity for learning.

"we ended up with loads of new members, lots of different relationships, new perspectives... we are quite diverse in [area], it brought in that some of our other communities didn't feel they were being listened to. So we did a ... Diversity in a

Multicultural World evening... when you brought it all down, it was just about wanting to know information and make sure their children were accessing everything they should be, and empowering them. So that was a really good one as well, brought the whole community together." (PCF Lead [13])

In some areas, PCF capacity to deliver activities had also grown as a result of parents becoming engaged with the project.

"I think it started the same as you with two and then it's got bigger and bigger and bigger and different faces are coming to every one as well. One of my parents is desperate to keep it going and take it over which is great as well. She really enjoys them. The questions, they're asking so many more questions." (SENCO [06])

However, in other areas, lack of capacity within PCFs meant this aspect of the project struggled to get off the ground. The importance of skilled PCF facilitators and strong local connections within projects was discussed. Both capacity and skills for on the ground engagement were considered to be key, particularly in areas where schools and parents may not be used to working together, and where existing PCFs may be more used to working at a strategic level.

"It's been difficult for some parent carer forums but we had some strong connections in one of our areas, and it's really flourished for them as a parent carer forum. So that's been a real positive... it has helped them to extend their arms out to people who they probably wouldn't have had access to, bring that support to for the future." (Project Lead [16])

Some PCF Leads also noted that their involvement in AiS projects had increased demand for their work beyond the project. For example, in some areas, schools which were not part of the AiS project had requested PCF input.

"now we've got other schools asking us to do mini forums in their schools that aren't in the project... having that link to the local authority, they never knew about things like the parent carer forum, and all the things that we do. So they have engaged in the same community... and it's been priceless, it's been something that we must keep on going." (PCF Lead [13])

Case study: Long term regional development of a parent carer forum

In the North East, continued investment in PCFs as part of the AiS project has increased capacity to support parents at a local, regional and national level. Learning from early stages of the project has been implemented resulting in effective ways of working and positive outcomes.

PCF regional leaders from the North East sit on the NNPCFs national steering group for AiS projects and represent Parent Carers on the national AiS project team. At a national level, their role is to provide strategic oversight, ensure parent carer views are incorporated into all decision making, and to feedback on how projects are delivered on the ground. On reflection, delivering the PCF pilot project in the first year was challenging. One advantage of being involved in both delivery and conversations at a strategic level was being able to feed back learning from on the ground and develop co-production aspects of the project across subsequent years and in new geographies.

"we used the learning [from the pilot] to get it right from the beginning [outside the North East]. I think actually the project here in the North East has been richer in phase two and three from that learning. So I think it did actually play a huge part in shaping it to be the way that it is now because it allowed us to have those open

conversations and actually for people to realise what true co-production actually is and that it can be messier than just having a couple of reps, and things can take longer" (PCF Lead).

PCF regional leaders work with PCF representatives to manage delivery of Parent Carer activities consistent with the ethos of the project within their locality. PCF representatives use initial meetings with families and school staff to make an assessment of need, and write an engagement plan, which is submitted to regional managers who provide feedback, communicate plans with the project team, and release funding for activities. They also work to support each other, e.g. providing cover for engagement activities where required, and developing the parent carer element of the project in schools which have faced challenges getting these off the ground. The capacity and structure of the North East PCF has also enabled representatives to support AiS projects outside the North East – e.g. in Project Manager, Steering group or representative roles.

"it's been a really good thing to be able to set up a strong regional team so that if forums don't have capacity, families and schools in the area don't suffer as a consequence because we're really keen, especially now that we're all part of an ICB, that there should absolutely be equality equity and parity across all thirteen of our local authority areas... there's actually four areas who've said, "We just don't have the capacity," but we've been able to fly in the regional team and they're looking after it and it's working really well. I think we've found a little gem that we would share with other people... this is a regional project. It's not a local area project. So if you've got some really strong leads from other PCFs, there's no shame in bringing them in to assist" (PCF Lead [50]).

AiS project support in terms of both security in funding and buy-in from the NHS was credited with supporting development of a *"pinch with pride"* culture among PCFs in the North East. This reflects attitudes to both learning and support – e.g. local PCF representatives have begun to view approaching the regional team for support as a strength as opposed to a weakness. Collective problem solving was credited with a local PCF representative increasing the number of parent carer representatives in their area, in turn preventing them from pulling out of the project due to being overwhelmed. The importance of investing in parent carers was highlighted as key to growing the project – providing training and support to develop confidence of PCF representatives so that they can eventually run self-sustaining school based groups drawing on back-up support only if needed.

"I always say, we're one workforce and it's all about working around that young person to get them the best outcomes. So if we're going to invest in our schools and invest in our school staff, we need to be investing in the parent carers as well because we are one team ultimately" (PCF Lead).

As a result of being involved in the project, PCF regional leaders reported a dramatic increase in PCF membership and active engagement, largely through having a presence in schools. Parents have reported they feel better connected, more able to communicate with school staff, more confident, listened to, and valued as part of their community. Parent carers who initially attended groups have begun to take on leadership roles as parent carer representatives who run groups of their own. In one local authority area, the PCF offer has now developed beyond other aspects of the project, with parent groups now delivered in over half of schools.

4.2.3 Outcomes for school staff

School staff engagement in AiS project activities, particularly training, was reported by participants in focus groups and interviews. Following project activities, outcomes for school staff included feeling empowered to support young people with Autism through improved knowledge and understanding; having time to reflect and share learning; and developing relationships with other school staff, professionals and parents.

Engaged and open to change

Across a range of AiS projects, focus group and interview participants reported school staff were enthusiastic and engaged in training provided by the project. This was linked with staff being open to changing established views and approaches to working with Autistic children and young people, which was mentioned as a positive characteristic of school staff present at training, and also as a consequence of training.

"They're willing to expand their knowledge and their views as well... you're always going to get some people who are quite set in their ways, but I'd say the majority of people that I've met and spoken to through the Schools Project have been people who are eager to learn. They'll come with notebooks... they'll want to come and talk to you afterwards and book in for additional surgeries... they want to learn more and different ways to help those Autistic individuals." (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

Within many projects, training was provided predominantly to SENCOs, leading to some suggestion that it could be *"training the converted"*.

"the Senior Leadership Team had given priority to pastoral care staff to do the training, and the pastoral care staff, it was almost like even though they learnt loads... it was like training the converted. They were already very good at what they did within the schools, and they were still trying to struggle with how to implement it to the rest of the staff." (PCF Lead [19])

However, being open to change and considering different approaches to working with Autistic children and young people was also mentioned as a consequence of training. School staff shared examples of good practice for cascading learning from AiS training as continuing professional development (CPD) within their schools. In some areas a whole school approach to staff training was adopted. Engagement of school senior leadership teams was identified as important for both these approaches.

"Now, amongst professionals we have a team that are better trained but are now unanimously, entirely prepared to change." (Teacher & SENCO [10])

"being able to have a universal offer for dinner ladies, teaching assistants, everybody and doing the whole school approach has been really amazing." (PCF Lead [23])

Further, participants reflected that school staff gained a better understanding of the perspectives of Autistic children and young people by attending group sessions for children and young people. While directed at children and young people, it was noted that these sessions had benefits for teaching assistants and SENCOs.

"I think it's really important that they're there to hear the young people's voice as well. I think it has more impact, doesn't it, if they hear the young people's voice rather than hearing it anecdotally and feedback afterwards." (Local Authority Lead [31])

"a lot of the TAs had learnt quite a lot from the workshop. Just listening also to the personal stories of young people that had been through the school system and their struggles was really powerful". (Charity Partner [04])

Case study: School cascading learning and embedding change

In one area in the south of England, a series of training sessions were held in person with approximately 10 teachers, SENCOs and Learning Support Assistants, representing 6 schools. School staff have worked to cascade AiS training within their school teams and embed change to support Autistic children and young people.

An Assistant Headteacher/SENCO and an Early Career Teacher attended the training on behalf of one primary school. The school has allowed the SENCO to work with autonomy to implement the project, with protected time in staff Professional Learning Meetings every other week, and the full meeting once a term. The SENCO has dedicated this protected time to cascading continuing professional development based on the AiS project to all staff. The staff team are informed of tasks being carried out by the SENCO; the wider staff team also take on their own small-scale projects to support neurodiverse children. Progress is reported back to the school Senior Leadership Team.

Initially there was some resistance from the staff team, potentially as a result of rapid turnover of senior leadership and ideas in the school during recent challenging times, a reluctance to change established ways of working, and perceptions of increased workload. However, by taking steps one at a time, sharing outcomes and framing outcomes in relation to staff wellbeing, rapid change has been observed.

The school has undertaken work to:

- achieve a balance between over and under stimulation in classrooms e.g. using more muted colours and ensuring information on displays is necessary and proportionate.
- Reduce crowding and introduce structure at workstations so the same resources are present whether a child is sitting alone or with peers.
- In some instances, pinning skirts to tables to give children the option of privacy and a retreat within the classroom
- Extended the way children transition from one primary site to another (Year 2 to Year 3)
- Produce and implement personalised support plans for neurodiverse children and young people to reduce stress accumulation across the day, e.g. changing the way teachers get the child's attention, request a response, mark work and provide feedback.

Now, 13 of 15 classrooms are set up as sensory-friendly learning environments. The teachers have a higher standard of training for their work with neurodiverse children and young people, with some who were initially resistant to change becoming leaders in the push to make the school Autism-friendly. The school has also received positive feedback from parents particularly around children's improved social development, and from children particularly recognising safe spaces.

There are still some challenges – e.g., writing up new policies in line with the school's new Academy Trust; how to change hearts and minds of a minority of staff with strong opinions and fixed mindsets; and how to maintain priority for this project within the wider education policy agenda. However, this case study evidences that huge success can be seen in a short timescale where school staff are ready, willing, and skilled, with the authority, time, and senior leadership support to drive forward the AiS project.

"I would count this amongst the best training that I've ever received... I think one of the biggest challenges now will be how much of this information in its highest quality form can make it to all teachers in the city, in the country... I'm quite good at doing

CPD and training with teachers so I'm delivering as much as I can. Of course, that is also still limited to me then delivering that to 15 or 19 people every other week....

I certainly can't fault the delivery, the expectation for engagement or the way that we've then finished year one by reporting on the successes of year one. I'm quite excited... I think what really just highlights for me is that there was too much that I didn't know and then there was almost everything that my team didn't know."

(Teacher & SENCO)

Feeling empowered to support young people

Feedback from school staff about AiS training sessions and environmental assessments highlighted improvements in school staff knowledge about how to support Autistic children and young people. Participants in focus groups and interviews talked about "learning curves" and "light-bulb moments" of understanding.

"class teachers who actually get very little specific SEN training... one's got three diagnosed Autistic children and one's got four diagnosed Autistic children in their class currently. They just said, "Oh gosh. I wish I knew this this time last year because I potentially would have maybe set up my classroom a little bit differently." So in conjunction with the training, the audit came and talked to teachers about the environment in which they are teaching... recommendations were put forward for staff to consider how they might make their classroom more Autism friendly. I know the teachers have found that really useful." (SENCO [14])

School staff reported feeling more confident in the knowledge that their knowledge was up to date, and the guidance they received was good quality, from experienced professionals and project partners. The practical focus of AiS training and environmental assessments made school staff feel positive and empowered to reflected on things they would do differently, as well as implementing strategies to support children and young people.

"I think for us, having that staff development has been amazing... actually teachers coming back and saying, "That I found really useful," or, "I've actually implemented that now into my classroom and now I have more awareness of this child and how to support." ... the special needs schools are oversubscribed so as mainstream schools, we are seeing a lot more children with social communication needs and being trained and equipped into supporting those children, it just makes the teachers feel empowered" (Teacher & Inclusion Manager [08])

In addition, the practical focus of the training had help one participant focus on specific information and adjustments which could be made to support children and young people.

"you want to make all these changes and you read up all this information in new books or online or you hear things on the emails that come around from unions and things.... you just don't know how to implement a lot of things without having a bit of a clash between them, a bit of a contradiction between ideas... So, the Autism Schools Project, being able to go in and say these are the specific things that you can do to help these pupils... I think that that's been a real strength." (Parent & Project Support Officer [11])

Time to reflect and share learning

School staff and project teams noted that AiS staff training had provided unique opportunities for school staff reflection, group discussion and sharing of learning. The importance of having time allocated to learn and reflect on practice was recognised by participants in focus groups and interviews, as were the benefits of sharing learning with staff from different schools including SENCOs, teachers and learning support assistants.

"I think that's what really made it interesting because you could have those discussions with other people in other schools, and we change every kind of week who we sit with... we'd have different teachers in primary schools or secondary schools kind of join us for the other discussions, and we'd have whole group discussions." (SENCO Assistant [12])

Feedback on staff training sessions was gathered across AiS projects. In some areas, project teams held reflective sessions which encouraged school staff to feed back about aspects of project activities which went well and what could be improved to support ongoing development of AiS projects. In this context, several participants highlighted school staff open honest reflection and project teams being open to constructive criticism as both productive and positive.

"I think what they've done really well ... is having that session yesterday where they sat and reflected and they were very brave about saying, "Actually, we don't think this bit of training particularly worked very well." The schools spoke out about it and said, "Because it kind of wasn't what it said on the tin, we didn't think this particularly worked." I think that takes actually some real guts ... sometimes we're too polite" (PCF Lead [50])

Developing relationships

The development of relationships was also mentioned as a positive outcome of AiS projects for school staff. Attending AiS project activities such as training sessions facilitated staff from different schools to meet, share learning and develop professional relationships.

"We've had a local authority area where there are two schools that are now working, they're sharing their good practice and their learning in a way that they hadn't done before. There's something about creating that local network that we weren't doing deliberately but it sort of came out of the project and we now see it as a good thing." (Project Manager, [36])

Many AiS projects arranged training or meetings for parents and school staff to attend and worked to facilitate communication between parents and school staff. Project teams shared feedback which reflected that these aspects of the project played an important role in developing positive relationships between school staff and parents.

"we went out there and we met the headteacher and the SENCO, and then we did a presentation to some parents. And from that the headteacher came back and said, "That's just helped us engage with those families so much better." Because they came out and had a conversation, had a coffee, a more relaxed environment, you know what I mean? So, creating the environment, I think, that's what this project does is creates the environment for people to have a good quality conversation." (PCF Lead [13])

"both sides can hear what message both sides are getting. I think from a culture and working together partnership wise, I think it's really powerful to have the parents and the school staff attending the same training so the parents don't question, "Well what are the school staff being told?" and so they actually know what's been involved." (Project Manager [15])

Professional partners responsible for delivering AiS activities also reflected on positive comments they had received, and the benefits of working directly with school staff to share their occupational therapy and educational psychology professional expertise on an ongoing basis (see also Section 3.1.7).

"compared to your normal EP [Educational Psychology] work, honestly, this has been the most positive feedback you get from pupils and from staff and parents that I've

done for a long time... it's going back to what we used to do years ago which is more that preventative model, isn't it, and that supportive role, more hands on because everybody is inundated, aren't they, with caseload. It's a case of going in, doing that very individualised work, pushing forward for EHCP [Education Health and Care Plan] and then backing out again. It's really nice to have that long term contact with the schools or the young people." (Educational Psychologist [34])

In other areas, strengthening of existing professional relationships with school staff was highlighted as a consequence of projects building relationships around schools. For example, in one area the AiS project profile and communications has begun to develop stronger local links between schools, Autism training providers and Local Authority colleagues working on Autism strategy.

"It's early days, but I think having that local connection and relationship between one training partner and two schools, helps, because they get to know each other and with that mentoring relationship, they're able to think beyond just, we're delivering this training and then we're going away again." (Project Manager [36])

4.2.4 Outcomes for schools

Early outcomes for schools included changes to the school environment, initial improvements in learning, and the beginnings of culture change.

Changes to school environments

A range of changes to school environments were discussed as a result of project activities such as environmental audits, occupational therapy input, staff training, and activities to promote children and young people's voice.

The importance of achieving a balance between over and under-stimulation in school environments was recognised. Stakeholders described physical changes made to the school landscape aimed at creating a calm space, such as reducing use of bright colours and increasing use of neutrals on walls, improving lighting, reducing clutter, reducing noise, and creating structure.

"Workstations previously had been incredibly crowded and muddled areas the children would be at, because they weren't coping working within the group. We now have very well-structured workstations that mirror areas within peer and group work. So, if a child has for example, a book, a ruler or a pencil and a glue stick when they sit with their peers, they have exactly that when they get to their own desk. If there are any resources out, they are only appropriate to the lesson being taught." (Teacher & SENCO [10])

"We got a student to complete a sensory audit, quite a high-functioning Autistic student, and so she told us that she found the lighting too harsh, and it would bounce back on and reflect on the tables... so we got whole new tables ordered, and chairs... we're now getting a quote for, to change our lighting to more natural and also get a dimmer switch so it can be controlled a bit more" (Assistant SENCO [12])

The importance of safe spaces was highlighted across AiS projects as a key focus for neurodiverse children and young people. Stakeholders from several AiS projects described creating safe spaces in schools with appropriate equipment to support children and young people to self-regulate. These included examples of both calm spaces and movement spaces.

"we've got a room that used to be called the thinking room where children went to think, it's now called the chill room, and it's got beanbags and it's got soft furnishings,

and there's some books in there. We're having LED lighting installed over the summer, and Bluetooth, so the iPad can project music into there as well, so it's more like a calm room." (School Champion [44])

"we created a movement room in a space that was normally just used as breakout space for small group learning. So, I put a swing frame up with different swings, we've got a barrel in there, we've got a trampette. We've got all sorts of movement activities." (OT [02])

Example of space before and after becoming a movement area



In one instance, the creation of a wellbeing space was initiated by children and young people who were involved in AiS student ambassador training, who decided to write to the headteacher to request a wellbeing room and plan to fundraise for equipment.

Where it was not possible to change the physical environment, stakeholders reflected on changes to the social environment aimed at reducing stress and sensory overstimulation for neurodiverse children and young people. Examples included changing the language used on behaviour logs to reduce connotations of truancy or bad behaviour; ensuring that activities such as tests go ahead when children and young people have been told to expect them; reducing the amount of time pupils with sensory needs have to spend in the dinner hall; and increasing teacher awareness of how to improve pupils experience of interactive whiteboards.

"they can now have a little badge and show that to the dinner lady so they don't necessarily have to stand in the queue because the dinner halls are actually a sensory minefield" (PCF Lead, [30])

"A big thing that came up was, on the white board or the interactive board, how much information is on there. And pretty much all the boys in one of our groups were like, "Oh yeah, I get on my Chromebook and I delete loads of stuff, and I look at one thing at a time." And the teachers were like, "I hadn't really thought about that, how overloading the information is, and not knowing what I'm supposed to read and what I'm supposed to write down." So I think those sort of sessions were sort of pushing them to the next bit of conversations they hadn't really had yet." (Mental Health Practitioner [25])

Initial improvements in learning

Initial improvements in children and young people's academic progress were reported by some school staff as a wider outcome of the project. This was linked to changes

implemented by SENCO staff, and improvements in communication and understanding following staff attending AiS training sessions.

For example, teachers' use of 'now and next' boards and task boards at one secondary school worked well to support the wellbeing of young people, while also helping with their presentation of work. Implementation of personalised support plans in one primary school alongside changes to the school environment was reported to have resulted in social and academic improvements for neurodiverse and neurotypical children.

"what we've seen actually was that rising tide really did lift all boats. There was improvement in learning" (Teacher & SENCO [10])

The beginnings of culture change

Stakeholders across several project areas reported early signs of culture change within schools engaged in AiS projects. For example, school policy changes were reported in some areas relating to school uniform and behaviour management. Training delivered via the project was also reported led to a change in school staff approach to young people and families from 'us and them' to team-working.

"There was a lot of commentary in our school about, well maybe it's a parenting problem because we're not seeing this at school. Not that people were deliberately judgmental, but I think there was a certain need for just changing our stance a little bit and showing a bit of professional humility. By creating a culture within the school now of trusting families and being willing to make adaptations just because of maybe, we've now seen that we can impact a child's whole life." (Teacher & SENCO [10])

In other schools, the need to update specific policies was identified because of AiS project activities. For example, in one school a session with children and young people raised awareness of how a school communication policy had not taken into account neurodiverse pupils' needs.

"we were exploring the communication side, and how communication can be very challenging for young people. And the school I was working with suddenly pointed to the big sign that was on the wall in the classroom, and apparently is on the wall in every classroom, and is all over the school, of the four types of voices that you should use within the school. And these four types of voices are numbered zero to three, and then have an explanation as to what type of voice that is. One of which has a silent voice. And we had this huge long conversation about how confusing that is, because how can you have a silent voice? And the teachers in the room were just completely taken aback by this, because this is obviously something really big they're working on in school. And actually, every single Autistic student couldn't understand the communication that it was being part of." (Mental Health Support Lead [24])

4.2.5 National metrics

The aim of collecting national metrics was to establish baseline data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 (taking into account COVID-19 school disruption in 2020/21). This is due to project timelines; new AiS projects commenced delivery in the Spring/Summer term of 2021/22. Although there is minimal chance of demonstrating change as a result of projects as yet, the future aim would be to plot any changes in metrics year on year by school, area and overall, to measure outcomes in future.

The evaluation team reviewed data returned for quantity and quality, to assess the strengths and limitations of using these metrics as national indicators for AiS project outcomes, and whether/how data collection could be improved in future.

Quantity of data

Nationally, over 200 schools are estimated to be engaged in AiS projects. 14 out of 16 ICS areas returned some national metrics data to the evaluation team in July/August 2022. Seven areas returned data for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school year, reporting some data for 67 and 70 schools respectively. This includes data returned from the North East pilot project area.

- 12 areas returned national metrics for 2021-22, reporting some data for 110 schools
- 9 areas returned national metrics data for 2020-21, reporting some data for 83 schools
- One area also returned data for 2019-20, covering 10 schools.

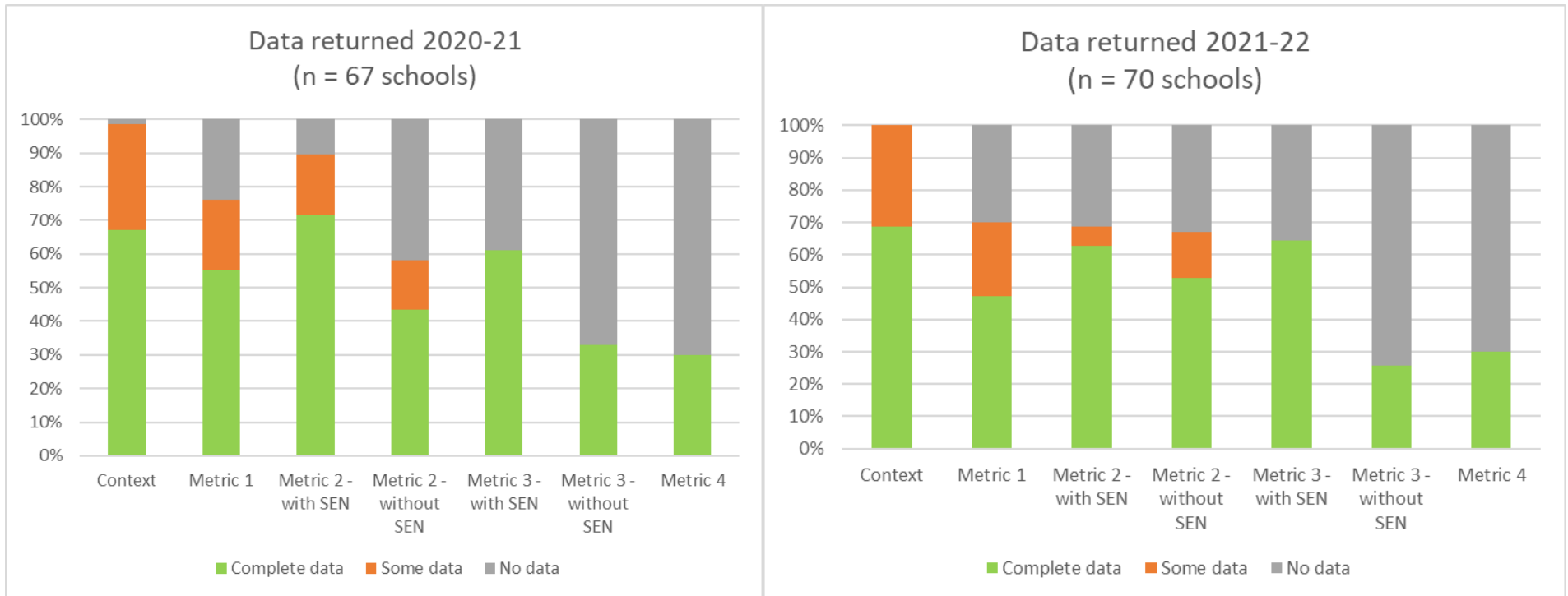
At the time of writing this report, complete data from which to establish a baseline across all metrics was limited.

- Nationally, complete baseline data for 2020-21 and 2021-22 was available from one school
- Complete baseline data for 2021-22 was available from 14 schools
- It was not possible for the national team to obtain data for metric 5, relating to admission to tier 4 beds for Autistic children and young people.

A summary of available data from the seven areas which returned data for 2020-21 and 2021-22 is shown in Figure 2. This was triangulated with caveats outlined by AiS project teams, and suggests:

- data relating to pupil numbers, attendance, and exclusions (context, and metrics 1-2) may be more readily available with a longer lead in time after the school year
- data relating to attendance and exclusions (metrics 2 and 3) may be more readily available for Autistic children and young people with SEN or EHCP, as opposed to those without
- data relating to pupils meeting short-term targets in reading, writing and maths (metric 4) is not readily available.

Figure 2 Summary of national metrics data available from 7 ICS areas returning data for both 2020-21 and 2021-22



Matching data across years

There was limited availability of complete data to test matching data by school across years.

- One school provided complete data for all metrics for 2020-21 and 2021-22 (14 schools provided complete data for 2021-22)
- A further two schools provided complete data for metrics 1-3 for 2020-21 and 2021-22
- A further 10 schools provided complete data for metrics 1-2 for 2020-21 and 2021-22

In future, matching of school data across years could be facilitated by reporting the Unique Reference Number for each school.

Quality of data

Where data was available, descriptive statistics were used to understand quality of data returned relating to context and metrics 1 to 4, across all years.

Context

- Contextual information such as school roll was unavailable for some schools. If school Unique Reference Numbers were provided it would be possible to supplement missing data and sense check reported data with relative accuracy.
- The percentage of school roll with Autism and SEN or EHCP was reported as being between 0 and 15% for primary schools; between 0 and 48% for secondary schools; and between 29 and 96% for special schools.
- For all but two secondaries the range was between 0 and 7%. Checks against publicly available school information indicate one is a community special school, the other is a secondary with no special classes.
- The majority of data reported for number of Autistic young people without SEN or EHCP were 0 values, suggesting this information is not readily available. This impacts on data availability for metrics 2 and 3, which are split by Autistic young people with and without SEN/EHCP; it was not possible to assess data quality for these metrics due to the large number of 0 values reported.
- Further, for some schools the same figure was reported for number of Autistic young people with and without SEN/EHCP; if this refers to the same Autistic young people it could lead to duplicate-counting.

Metric 1: Attendance levels for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP (days) and those without the number of young people on part time timetables

- For metric 1, the overall percentage absence for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP was reported as being between 0 and 99%. The most common (modal value) was 4% (5 values), and the majority of data reported was towards either the bottom or top end of the range as opposed to the middle, suggesting this may have been widely interpreted as percentage attendance.
- When data was adjusted to take this into account, the overall percentage absence for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP was reported as being between 0 and 46% (12% on average), again with 4% being the most common value (9 values). To ensure accurate data collection in future, the ask for this metric requires clarification.
- Approximately two thirds of returns for metric 1 excluding pupils on part-time timetables were either missing, exactly matched the overall percentage absence, or were 0 values. This information may not be routinely collected or readily available.

Metric 2 Permanent and fixed term exclusion data for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP

- For metric 2, the total number of permanent exclusions for Autistic young people with SEN or EHCP was reported as being between 0 and 8, with 0 being the average value.
- The total number of fixed term exclusions was reported as being 3 on average; values were between 0 and 31, with the exception of one secondary school which reported 42 fixed term exclusions.
- Where fixed term exclusions were reported, the average number of sessions missed was mostly also available. The overall average number of sessions missed was 3; reported values were between 0.5 and 16.5.

Metric 3 The number of Autistic young people who have left school (off roll) in the last two years with SEN or EHCP and reason why

- For metric 3, where available, the number of Autistic young people off-roll within the last 2 years with SEN or EHCP was reported as 2 on average; values were between 0 and 15. Common reasons reported were transition to the next tier of education, or transfer to another school.

Metric 4 The percentage of Autistic pupils with SEN or EHCP meeting their short-term targets

- For metric 4, there was considerable variation in the returns reported – between 4 and 100%.
- Many areas fed back that this data is not routinely collected or readily available, particularly after more than a year has passed (e.g. for school year 2020/21)

5 Reflections from Autism in Schools projects

5.1 Learning so far – Barriers and Enablers

While analysing the qualitative and survey data, the evaluation team noted common reflections in the form of enablers and barriers or challenges to the AiS projects and their ability to deliver project activities and achieve early outcomes. Table 4 presents these barriers and enablers grouped into broader themes.

There were varied or mixed opinions across the project teams on issues such as engagement. Therefore, engagement appears as both a barrier and enabler due to variation in the experiences of stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation.

In addition, the majority of project teams highlighted that COVID-19 and its ongoing impact in schools/education settings was a key challenge or barrier. This included ongoing restrictions, limited school capacity and availability of supporting organisations (e.g., CAMHS, Educational Psychology & other health services), and a noted breakdown in relationships between schools and parents/carers.

Table 4 Challenges and enablers to delivery of Autism in Schools projects

Theme	Challenges	Enablers
Project, administration / context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 (pressure and recovery) • Funding (short term, financial year vs school year) • Delivery & planning constraints within school year • Challenges long-term planning e.g., retaining contracted services • Procurement • Recruitment & HR challenges • Measuring outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New funding and focus for activity • Widespread passion & motivation to achieve project aims • Enthusiasm, willingness & positive attitude among project teams & stakeholders • Use critical time periods for organisation (Autumn term)
Area / geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large geography & face-to-face activities • Misunderstanding cultural differences • Engagement where organisations / individuals experience socio-economic deprivation & associated pressures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibly adapt to local geography and need • Careful school selection with input from key partners e.g. PCF, source additional delivery support as required • Work to understand stakeholder need, support wider participation & engagement
Relationships, Partnerships & Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited existing networks between local organisations • Time & resource needed to develop relationships, build networks, engage partners and co-produce • Limited workforce capacity/availability within partner organisations e.g. schools, CAMHS, local authorities • Lack of engagement from school headteachers and Senior Leadership Team • Cross-organisation miscommunication / misinterpretation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-established links between key partner organisations • Build on existing relationships and networks • Invest time & connect with relevant local services • Resource to build capacity within workforce as required • Co-production • Establish shared goals • Constructive, open communication • Listening and sharing learning
Leadership and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of project / organisation leaders from project team • Complexity: engaging and maintaining relationships with multiple individuals and organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share planning and decision making • Regular meetings such as steering groups • Dedicated project management support • Constructive conversations & practical actions • Clear responsibility and support for actions
Project approach & activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misunderstanding scope of the project • Staggered start, disjointed approach & uncertainty • Complex local model & resources • Scheduling / organisational difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible approach - "Planned but fluid" • Monitor project activities, reflect & respond to need / feedback • Co-production, informed by local knowledge • Involve external and local organisations • Accessible project activities

Theme	Challenges	Enablers
Engagement	<p><i>School staff</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time to engage, attend training, disseminate learning • Recruitment and continuity • Engaging roles beyond SENCO "Preaching to the converted" • Culture & some staff attitudes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior Leadership Team support and engagement • SENCOs/champions empowered to progress project • Dedicated staff time for training / CPD • Whole school approach • Time to reflect and share learning
	<p><i>Schools</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating expectations re: PCF relationships • Daunted by MOU/paperwork (postponed involvement) • Capacity issues, time pressure, activities out of area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share examples of project / PCF approach • Set clear and realistic expectations of schools at outset • Targeted recommendations / follow-ups with schools
	<p><i>Parent carers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited communication routes e.g. via schools where relationship is not strong • Understanding and supporting cultural / socioeconomic needs • Availability challenges e.g. work and childcare commitments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use multiple communication routes • Speak directly or take a relational approach where possible • Varied activities & communication methods

5.2 Embedding projects in the future

A range of approaches to embedding and sustaining AiS projects were shared via the survey, focus groups and interviews. Evaluation participants shared thoughts about aspects of the project which require continued delivery; how schools can be supported to self-sustain elements of the project; embedding children and young people's voice; planning ahead to maintain momentum; and deeper and wider integration of the project and local services.

Continuing project delivery

Across new AiS projects, project planning took place in the Autumn term, and project delivery in schools started during the Spring/Summer term of the 2021/22 school year. In this context, ongoing project delivery is required to embed AiS projects in 2022/23 and subsequent school years.

Sustained investment in PCFs has been shown to return benefit in the North East pilot project. Development of the Regional Team structure has supported local networks to grow in both coverage and resilience. This has been key for sustainable expansion, providing support for more parents to step into PCF Representative roles, taking responsibility for organising groups and facilitating constructive relationships with parents and schools. This in turn expands the number of parents able to access PCF support and advice. Evaluation findings suggest with continued funding and time, this model would be transferable to other areas. NHS England's role in securing ongoing funding for PCFs was seen as integral via ongoing budgets or priority setting for Integrated Care Systems Learning Disability and Autism programmes.

"we've asked if parents would like to be involved in working with them running [the school based mini Parent Carer Forums], eventually us handing it over to them to run but we'd support them as a forum. So, every school has had interest. Parents have ticked the box to say they would be interested in helping... we're putting together information to be able to give to the schools and the parents and work with them on handing it over and developing what the next academic years would look like." (PCF Lead [07])

Supporting schools to self-sustain

The potential for schools to be self-sustaining was discussed by evaluation participants across project areas. This evaluation has highlighted examples of school staff taking ownership the project, cascading AiS project training and embedding interventions in their schools. Sustaining AiS engagement and support activities with groups of neurodiverse children and young people was identified as one area which school staff could take ownership of and continue.

"our thinking for Year Two is actually to change that process a bit, and that we would take on the role of advising the school how to run the sessions. So that actually the school do the facilitating of the sessions, and they kind of get that group running. And then there doesn't have to be a limitation of five weeks, you know, we can give them the starting point of how the sessions start, how they evolve. And then the school can develop them from there...they can come back to us for consultation throughout if they want to be pointed in the right direction." (Mental Health Support Lead [24])

However, the risks of expecting schools to be entirely self-sustaining were also highlighted. The value of expert Autism support was discussed by evaluation participants. Delivery of staff training and arms-length support from AiS project teams was seen as key to continue for schools at all levels of involvement with the project, including refresher

sessions to maintain practice in line with up-to-date evidence. Overall responsibility for regular delivery of staff training and updates tends to sit with AiS project teams as opposed to school staff, with the exception of geographically isolated areas. The value of projects facilitating networks of school staff to collectively reflect, share progress, and discuss changes they are making was also highlighted, as an outside expert perspective is valuable when identifying solutions.

"we're looking at doing a network so there'd be a half termly meeting for the school champions... doing a little bit of training at that meeting but then allowing a bit of time for the school champions to network and speak to one another. What we are looking at as well is whether that network would be then facilitated by somebody from the Autism Education Trust... there to offer advice and support if it's more a case of, "Well I've got a child with x that's struggling with x, has anybody got any ideas,"" (Local Authority Project Lead [37])

School priorities and changes in staff were identified as key factors which had limited some schools' engagement with AiS projects and would limit school ability to self-sustain in future. Several approaches were suggested to mitigate these risks and support schools to embed and sustain AiS activities, including health, education, and local authorities working together.

AiS projects currently have funding and are growing in profile, but future changes in education or local policy strategies could lead to school priorities shifting, projects being "clouded by the next big thing" and losing momentum. At a school level, senior leadership engagement in the project was seen as critical, which leaders need to be balance with priorities such as working to Ofsted inspections, reports, and targets. AiS project approaches to promoting inclusivity could be complementary to measures implemented in schools rated as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement', as indicated by one of the case studies included above. Approaches to project delivery which build in accountability for schools with standards or competencies to meet and concrete actions to take against specific feedback were suggested.

"The school needs backing from us, from the NHS. They need some sort of accreditation. It could be as simple as a certificate or a badge or just something that they're able to show when they're trying to get more assistance, more funding, more training" (Engagement and Participation Worker [40])

Many evaluation participants emphasised the importance of engaging school Senior Leadership Teams directly in AiS projects alongside SENCOs. Involvement of senior leaders with responsibility for priorities, budgets and staff time was seen to signal investment in the project, and authorisation for cultural change. Further, engagement of more than one member of school staff was seen as important for sustainability and longevity. Senior leadership support is required to create capacity and time for staff to engage; and was critical to enable whole school approaches to training in project areas where this was offered. This evaluation highlights successful examples of top-down approaches to engagement with Senior Leadership – e.g., the North East pilot project team worked to engage Chief Executives of school trusts through presenting at a local panel. It also shows SENCOs can cascade training and embed the project in their schools if given a platform and protected time to progress the work.

"We... are actually going to do an event targeting heads and chairs of governors to try and tackle that [leadership engagement in the project]. I would say it is also partly a function of the time to do the project and getting the right people in schools engaged... have the heads really taken this on-board? Have the governors even heard of it?"

Those are the things that we're trying to tackle... you don't want to preach to the converted, you want to get the unconverted in." (Project Manager [36])

Evaluation participants also suggested projects could be embedded and sustained by engaging networks of schools such as Multi Academy Trusts, or secondaries and feeder schools. Potential for this approach to maximize consistency and learning between schools, and to maximize impact for children and young people, was discussed, particularly in relation to primary to secondary transition. Some project teams had already taken this approach, others planned to try rolling out the project across identified school networks in the 2022-23 school year. However, participants also discussed a range of factors to consider and balance when selecting schools, including level of need, readiness to engage, geography, and practicalities of delivering project activities.

Embedding children and young people's voice

Embedding children and young people's voice to continue driving forward AiS projects was considered important across project areas. While some projects had established programmes of activity with children and young people, many projects were developing these approaches to roll out in 2022-23. Alongside activities described in this report, several project teams outlined plans to work with children and young people as peer mentors, ambassadors, or school council members, to advocate or provide feedback from an Autistic or neurodiverse perspective. However, it was raised that to be sustainable this needs to be balanced with not over-consulting or putting too much pressure on neurodiverse children and young people. Some evaluation participants made the case for whole-school relational approaches as having the best potential to embed and sustain neurodiverse children and young people's voice in schools.

"I think what we have done is good for everybody, and that type of opportunity to reflect on your own sensory profile, irrespective of whether or not you've got a diagnosis or not, is a good thing to do, to think about emotions, positively, and proactively, is a good thing to do... the best way of really embedding the work that we have done, is if it was adopted whole school." (Charity Partner [20])

Planning ahead to maintain momentum

Notice of continued funding was described as important to enable advanced planning and maintain momentum of projects. Having confirmation of continued funding before the summer would support project teams to plan activities from one school year to the next. Sharing these plans with key project delivery stakeholders is important to retain project staff, volunteers and services, supporting sustainable project delivery. Sharing advance notice of activities can also support schools to allocate staff time, potentially improving attendance at staff training, and supporting them to further embed project elements.

"what we've planned for next year is to have it all planned out for them [schools]. We shared the dates with them yesterday and they're going out to them before the end of term for any changes to those. We're trying to avoid Christmas, Easter, the bits where we just know that they're probably not going to attend" (Project Lead [42])

Deeper and wider integration with local services

Evaluation participants highlighted integration as an important element of embedding and sustaining AiS projects in the future. For some evaluation participants this means integrating the project with existing Local Authority or place-based strategic action plans. For others, it means encouraging cross-organisational buy-in and joint working to bring together teams working on similar strands of work and have greater impact. For example, in one area, work was underway to co-produce with PCFs an accessible neurodiversity online portal with tools and resources for parents and practitioners and links to the local neurodiversity service pathway.

"this will fit into the neurodiversity strategy that we have for the city. And it'll fit into the MDT that we're creating, so that we'll kind of live and breathe that. Our project manager, who oversees all of that multidisciplinary kind of stuff, will keep an eye on this." (Project Lead [29])

It was recognized that multi-agency working is resource intensive and requires strategic co-ordination. This meant dedicating team or individual time to communicate and co-ordinate the project; with some areas planning to build on this with additional resource in future.

"We've all taken on elements of this as part of our role... It does need that constant coaxing and engagement and reaching out. It's got so many potentials to connect to quite a lot of areas. We really think it needs that dedicated team or manager." (Project Lead [42])

Widening access to training was discussed in relation to school staff, parent carers and wider agencies; many project teams discussed making training recordings and presentations available online via resource platforms. Some extended this idea, suggesting development of AiS resources which can be embedded on school websites; and accessible resources online for parent carers, including those with a disability, or English as a second language.

"the digital resources is about giving schools... chunks of it, they'll be able to download onto their own website and use for their staff as part of the induction, it's trying to embed it in what school does normally type thing. Again, there's a risk that if you have it sitting on an external website, it may not get used." (Project Manager [36])

AiS projects have potential to connect with many services and groups beyond schools, parent carers and CAMHS. This evaluation includes examples of involvement from mental health support teams, Occupational Therapy, Educational Psychology, and charity partners among others. Some project teams outlined ambitions to roll out training and project principles more holistically, to improve Autism awareness and skills for working with neurodiversity across these services and others.

"Our vision is really clear, that it's wonderful that this is going into schools and it's an amazing start, but we want it in nurseries. We want it in post-16. We want it in universities. We want it in doctor's surgeries. We want it everywhere... we need health onboard, education are sitting here, arms wide open, saying, "Come on, let's all work together. How do we take this forward?" Social care are onboard... bringing social care into the mix as well. They are all already restorative practice trained, but we want to move it towards relational practice." (Inclusion Officer [18])

6 Conclusion

6.1 Strengths and limitations

A key advantage of this evaluation is the depth and breadth of qualitative data collected and presented from a range of stakeholders across the AiS projects. This was possible due to the strong engagement with the evaluation and willingness of participants to share their experiences and learning.

The role of the independent evaluator has allowed for an impartial assessment of the projects at this early stage, and as such a balanced and considered perspective is presented in this report. Moreover, the evaluation team's communications and recruitment

approach were key strengths of this study. By adopting a flexible approach to participant characteristics and inclusion, the evaluation team built effective working relationships and networks with a range of different stakeholders who were contributing to AiS projects across England. Critically, the evaluation team did not adopt a 'one size fits all' approach to participation, welcoming different stakeholders from each project area and encouraging project teams to showcase the impact of their work. By being open and responsive to the nature of the overall AiS project as it developed, the evaluation team have been able to draw additional learning and insight from non-traditional data collection opportunities such as community of practice events and lessons learned sessions.

One key limitation is that participants or stakeholders from some project areas are not represented in this evaluation report. There are two reasons for this, firstly due to the large-scale nature of this national programme it was not possible to engage all stakeholders that were involved in all AiS projects nor were evaluators able to include all participants who expressed an interest in participating within the allocated time and resource. Secondly, some of the projects were unable to engage with the evaluation during the 2021-22 school year due to their projects being on alternative or delayed timelines. One limitation associated with these differing project timelines is that the evaluation was unable to explore some different approaches to project delivery, e.g., directly employing professionals to work with families.

A further limitation is noted regarding evaluation participants. Due to the early stage of the overall project, most participants were either part of the project team or paid partners. While the AiS projects were participatory projects and there is an advantage to including the perspectives of people with lived experience, some of the paid partners could also be considered as project beneficiaries, e.g., PCF representatives who are also parents. The above challenges may have limited the ability of the evaluation to capture unintended consequences of AiS projects.

Regarding the national metrics, there was limited quantitative data available at the time of this evaluation. Although the national metrics were decided with subject matter input from local authorities, schools and project management stakeholders, the timetable and process for data collection was not sufficiently developed to support teams to collect a complete quantitative dataset. This included data which the national project team expected to be available centrally regarding Tier 4 admissions. Therefore, evaluators have been unable to establish a baseline for the AiS projects after the first year.

6.2 Key findings

The majority of AiS projects in England delivered a range of project activities similar to the original pilot project in the North East, involving:

- training for school staff
- parent carer forum development and training
- training and sessions to explore children and young people's voice
- environmental assessment and improvements in schools
- connecting services working to support children and young people

Some projects had delivered additional activities, for example developing resources, online platforms, and community aspects of the project, such as a library book club to support families with neurodiverse children. Others took other alternative approaches to project delivery which it was not possible to represent in this evaluation (see section 6.1).

Across projects, evaluation participants welcomed the opportunity to support Autistic children and young people or neurodiversity in schools, reporting widespread support and agreement with the premise of the projects. There was considerable variation in how AiS projects developed, which activities were delivered, and the organisations and individuals involved in delivery. This was often linked to the geography of the area, readiness of relevant organisations and networks, and preferred engagement approaches of project leads and key stakeholders. Delivery of AiS projects involves engaging and managing relationships with multiple individuals and organisations. This is a complex task, and flexibility of projects was identified as a key strength.

This report provides evidence that projects engaged in this evaluation are beginning to report a range of desired outcomes (see Table 3, section 4.1). These include some early evidence of attendance improving and a change in school approaches to exclusions for Autistic children and young people. There was also evidence across projects of meaningful improvements in wellbeing for Autistic children and young people at school and at home, including an example of reduced need for respite care for some families. Projects have resulted in a range of positive outcomes for children and young people, parent carers and schools:

- Delivery of sessions with children and young people was associated with enjoyment, development of new friendships, improved self-awareness and resilience.
- Development of PCFs was associated with building parent carers trust in the project and school, building support networks, accessing new information and feeling empowered
- Delivery of training and support to schools was associated with school staff feeling empowered to support Autistic children and young people, being open to change, and developing better relationships with parents and professionals.

However, it was not possible to establish baseline data to understand the national impact of AiS projects on attendance, exclusions, and hospital admissions figures.

A range of challenges and enablers to delivery of AiS projects were identified, outlined in Table 4. Common challenges reported across projects included working with schools facing COVID-19 pressures and recovery, and limited workforce capacity and availability within partner organisations. Enablers included provision of new funding and focus for activity to support Autistic children and young people; school Senior Leadership Team support and engagement; and investing project time in building relationships, constructive conversations, and practical actions.

Finally, evaluation participants shared thoughts about how projects can be embedded and sustained into the future. These included sustained investment in aspects of the project which require continued delivery such as PCFs and school staff training. Some projects planned to support schools to self-sustain elements of the project such as engagement and support activities with groups of neurodiverse children and young people, with arms-length support. Embedding children and young people voice in projects, planning ahead to maintain momentum, and deeper and wider integration of the project with local services were also highlighted as important considerations for future development of these projects.

6.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Focus on embracing differences and understanding needs

Approaches to working with children, young people and families which focus on celebrating differences between individuals and building an awareness of each young person's needs are recommended. These approaches were associated with positive engagement, wellbeing, self-awareness and resilience for children and young people; and parents and staff teams feeling empowered to support them. This means taking a diagnosis-informed, as opposed to a diagnosis-focused approach to designing and delivering project activities.

Recommendation 2: Take a flexible approach to multi-area working

This evaluation report documents the importance of AiS project teams taking a flexible and inclusive approach to working across multiple areas. It is important to assess and consider geography, context and readiness at the outset, including pre-existing relationships and networks between relevant organisations and stakeholders. Flexible approaches may build upon identified strengths, such as existing communication or learning networks and community assets; while also recognising and addressing gaps, such as building trust between project teams, parents, and schools. Understanding similarities and differences between contexts and project delivery approaches is key to supporting and delivering Autism in Schools projects at a national, regional, ICS, and local level.

Recommendation 3: Work towards connectivity at scale

This report demonstrates that most AiS project teams involved numerous local and national organisations in project planning and delivery. This emerging picture shows the importance of health, education, local authority and community and voluntary sector partners working together to support Autistic children and young people, and their families. Developing and sustaining these cross-sector relationships at a local, regional, and national level is important to enable ongoing AiS project delivery, consolidate efforts, and maximise benefits for all involved. Examples of cross sector working involve sharing key resources; developing Autism specialists within mental health support teams to deliver early intervention in schools; signposting community and voluntary sector support available to parents as part of diagnostic pathways; and prioritizing SEND and Autism awareness CPD among education and social care teams. Connectivity is critical to understand where services can become more joined up, and how gaps can be bridged to help schools and families navigate and access support when needed.

Recommendation 4: Strategically embed AiS projects for sustainability

This evaluation highlights the importance of engaging senior leaders and multiple organisations to unlock opportunities for positive change. Building upon recommendation 3, project leaders should consider how AiS project aims and delivery align with strategic planning at a national, regional, local, and organisational level. This may involve working to explicitly align AiS project aims and delivery with key strategic goals, such as national health and education strategic guidance and approaches to Autism, neurodiversity and SEND; local Autism and SEND strategy; organisational objectives; Academy policies, and school development plans. Strategically embedding AiS projects may support and sustain involvement and commitment to prioritising early intervention and preventative support in schools for Autistic children and young people across multiple sectors, organisations, and teams, creating conditions amenable to longer term cultural change.

Recommendation 5: Further develop national metrics

Further work on suitable national indicators and metrics is required to enable use of quantitative data to understand the impact of AiS projects on attendance, exclusions, and hospital admissions. In future, it would be of benefit to:

- Explore availability of relevant standardised national data collections which metrics could be extracted from, such as the School Census; data collection and reporting timelines may need to be adjusted accordingly.
- Where this is not possible, set out clear timelines for data collection direct from schools which take into account the school year.
- Work with a group of relevant staff from AiS project teams to develop clear guidelines and data capture templates to support accurate and meaningful data collection direct from schools across project areas.

Recommendation 6: Continue national evaluation

As acknowledged throughout this report, new AiS projects started during the Spring/Summer term of the 2021/22 school year. Most projects were in the early stages of delivery at the time of this evaluation, and some teams were unable to engage with the national evaluation due to different or delayed timelines. As such there is a need for further national evaluation work to:

- Bring together local evaluation reports to map activity across all AiS projects, including those unable to participate to date.
- Continue to capture AiS project learning and outcomes as delivery progresses, including how teams are embedding, sustaining and/or scaling projects.

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